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vezendi's shadow

Slayers™

6

Hajime Kanzaka

スレイヤーズ 6

ヴェゼンディの闇

闇の世とは別に 魔族
そんざいがあり……

レッサー・デーモンの大群から、
無数の炎の矢が解き放たれた！

SLAYERS

VOL.6: VEZENDI'S SHADOW

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They Sure Pop Back Up Quick…

I was being followed. That much I knew.

It wasn't hard for me to figure it out—I've been known to be perceptive, in addition to being *slick.* I made sure to keep walking, and make-believe everything was hunky-dory, as I followed the path that led out of town. Ever since leaving the inn someone was on my tail, but I pretended not to notice so I could lull my stalker into a false sense of security.

The edge of the forest loomed ahead in the growing darkness. If I wanted, I could still turn around and head back to the inn.

Nah! I slipped my thumbs into my belt. *That would be lame. Bring it on, whoever you are!*

I quickened my pace down the path, out of town, and into the wild. The evening sky turned a dark violet; the hubbub from the taverns grew fainter behind me and small, lonely houses on the town's edge served as an unenthusiastic goodbye.

But that sneaky little presence still followed. I wrinkled my nose, more than a little annoyed. *Persistent little bastard,* I thought. *It's either somebody out to kill me, or a creep who's found true love.*

Not that I would blame him for falling in love, mind you. I'm sexier than a buffet table after a thirty-day starvation diet.

By the time I began cutting through the forest, the only light that broke through the overhanging branches was that from the cloud-

shrouded full moon. I camouflaged my presence as much as I could, trying to stay in the shadows. I still couldn't fool whoever was following me, though—he only got closer. I clenched my fists and took a breath.

Better deal with this, Lina.

I whipped around just as the clouds parted. Silvery light spilled through the foliage overhang, lighting up the shadows behind me.

My jaw dropped. "Amelia?!" I blurted.

Amelia squealed from behind a tree. "Miss Lina!" she cried, jumping out from her hiding place. She gripped the area over her heart. "You surprised me!"

"*I surprised you?*" I stared at her incredulously. "Amelia, you were the one sneaking after me! I was ready to blast you into next week!"

Amelia gave me her best but-you're-leaving-me-out frown. "I'm sorry, but I noticed you sneak out of the inn. You're planning on some bandit extermination, aren't you?" That made me stop. I hadn't expected her to completely nail the bull's eye.

"A-and?" I stuttered after a moment. "So what? Is there any *other* reason a girl would sneak out of her room in the middle of the night?"

If Zel or Gourry had found me out there, they would've said I was up to something kinky. They have absolutely no understanding of a pure lady's heart.

I huffed angrily and crossed my arms. "Amelia," I snapped, "you

better not have come all the way out here to stop me."

Amelia shook her head and emphatically clenched her fists. A clap of thunder suddenly resounded in the night sky. "No!" she cried. "I'm here to come *with* you!"

Uh-oh.

"You're… what?" I croaked.

"Heinous conspirators band together into bandit groups with the sole aim of stealing to satisfy their own greed. Whatever their other motivations, I cannot allow such evil to pass through this world unpunished!" She raised one of her fists into the air. "We must kick their butts! At once!"

And with that, Amelia spun around and marched deeper into the forest with her head held high.

"W-wait a sec!" was all I managed to splutter. For a second, I wished I'd taken the option to head back to town—how was I supposed to get anything done with Little Miss Morality hanging on my heels?!

Amelia halted in her tracks and glanced back. "You're not going to tell me not to come, are you?" she asked in almost a whimper.

She was going to make things very difficult, I could tell.

"It's not that," I said. Her puppy-dog eyes bore into me, and I shifted uncomfortably. It's not that her puppy-dog eyes *work* on me, but they're usually the prelude to a dozen loud speeches.

Dammit! I thought. Fine. She can tag along… as long as she

agrees to one small detail. I pointed at her. “I want lots of magic out of you,” I warned. “And you’re not getting more than fifty percent of the loot, no matter how many bandits you fry.”

Amelia smiled brightly. I took that smile to mean, “Frying bandits is its own reward.”

* * *

After finding a bandit hideout, shooting off a bunch of attack spells, and leaving a pile of steaming brigands, I was ready for my share of the loot. I rubbed my hands and started sorting through the sacks.

“Hmm,” I murmured as I inspected the spoils. “It’s not as much as I expected.” I frowned in disappointment. How many bandits did a girl have to explode for a decent day’s wage?

I stuffed my knapsack with an armload of trinkets. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. It’s so rural up here that these guys probably couldn’t find many innocents to steal from.”

Geographically speaking, we were well up in the north of the already-northern Duchy of Kalmatt. We were pretty far removed from the world’s larger cities and any well-traveled roads.

Of course, bandit groups may be rare out in the hinterlands, but if there’s one thing I’ve learned in my travels, it’s that the supply of evil is inexhaustible. I’ve exterminated a lot of bandits in my time, but it never seems to make a dent in the overall bandit population. They’re like *weeds—filthy* weeds with bad teeth.

I wasn’t worried about our low bandit-count that night; I knew

we'd be busting plenty of brigand head another evening. I'm sure the concept didn't even dawn on Amelia, since our work had put her in a particularly good mood.

"Don't think about this work in terms of *money,* " she admonished with a wag of her finger. "You did your part tonight to purge the woods of evil! Even if we're uncertain about the future, we can be assured that we've taken a step forward in the name of justice!"

Yawn.

"Amelia," I murmured, "do you realize how much we've spent on travel expenses lately?"

She opened her mouth to speak again, then stopped. She stared at me like I'd just sprouted horns. "What?" was her brilliant reply.

I sighed heavily. *Figures,* I thought. I often felt like the only one with brains in our outfit. I mean, I had Gourry, who never used his head for anything beyond eating and wondering where to next stick the pointy end of his sword; there was Amelia, whose mind was perpetually wrapped up in thoughts of justice and order and all that crap; and then there was Zelgadiss, who was too busy being a mysterious loner (whilst trying to wash the stink of evil off his hands) to get his head in the game. That left only me to address the question of how die hell we were gonna pay our way along our travels.

If we weren't in such a hurry, and if we'd been traveling along busier highways or through big cities, it would have been a different story altogether: odd jobs as bodyguards or transporters are always

good for a little extra cash. But as it stood, our expenses were piling higher and higher, so I had no choice but to slip out of the inn and go bandit hunting for the good of the team.

Of course, I always made sure to skim a little off the top for my troubles. I may have my group's survival in mind, but I'm not beyond rewarding myself to keep motivated. And no, that doesn't count as greedy!

Amelia suddenly touched my arm. "Miss Lina," she whispered. "Wait."

I glanced up from buckling my knapsack. "What, Amelia? Toilet break?"

Amelia clicked her tongue and looked at me like I'd just embarrassed her in front of all her friends. She shook her head. "Something's here," she hissed.

Something? I quickly scanned the area for presences. All I saw around me were the silhouettes of trees. Darkness enveloped everything outside the reach of the dimly glowing lighting spell above my head. Some crickets chirped.

"You're kidding, right?" I asked her quietly. "There's nothing here."

"No," she snapped. "There's *something* here." Her voice was firm, and even in the darkness I could tell her face had gone grim.

Maybe *I* couldn't sense anything, but I'm not a priestess like Amelia. Priestesses have an uncanny intuition for sensing things most other people can't, so Amelia's abilities, theoretically, could

trump my own. And if she *was* right, whoever was in our proximity had to be incredibly smooth—someone sneaky enough to make himself barely detectable.

I turned my back to Amelia's and slowly drew my short sword.

At that instant, the chirping of the crickets suddenly stopped. The forest fell dead silent just as the darkness went heavier.

And then I sensed it—a raging bloodlust surging toward us.

"It's coming!" Amelia warned, bracing herself. From the darkness, in the direction Amelia faced, a lone shadow rushed out of the trees.

What the hell is that?!

I quickly chanted a spell, knowing I wouldn't be able to get it off in time. The shadowy figure sprinted toward me. I lashed out with my sword, but my attacker was all over it—he easily snapped my blade in half with his hands.

"Crap!" I grunted as I leapt backward.

One of the shadow's feet swung in my direction, aimed for the pit of my stomach. It was too fast and I was too late!

"Nngh!"

Luckily, the shadow was suddenly thrown backward. Amelia had managed to launch her own kick in the nick of time.

The shadow silently regained its balance as its evil little eyes focused squarely on me.

“Who are you?” Amelia demanded, keeping her battle pose. The shadow didn’t have to answer; I knew exactly who it was.

“An old friend,” I told her. “I remember these moves.” Turning my full attention to the shadow, I gave it a disgusted glare. “I was hoping I’d never have to run into *you* again, Zuuma.”

“Zuuma?!” Amelia’s eyes went wide as saucers. “That’s *him?!”*

Zuuma looked just like I remembered him—completely covered from head to toe in black garb. All I could see were his eyes, two penetrating points of light within his hooded face. Amelia probably hadn’t recognized him right away because, at first glance, Zuuma looked like any other assassin.

B u t *I* didn’t have trouble telling him apart from the average scum-of-the-week. It’s hard to forget a guy who came ridiculously close to killing you.

My last memory of Zuuma was of his retreat after Gourry had hacked off both his arms. He decidedly had arms again, which sucked, but wasn’t hard to believe— high-ranking priests are known to regenerate lost limbs. I mentally kicked myself for having not finished Zuuma off when I’d had the chance.

“What are you doing here?” I called flatly. “Don’t you remember? The guy who hired you to come after me died a pretty spectacular death!”

Zuuma shot down my subtle threat almost instantly. “I was paid in full,” he intoned. “And I do not rest until my job is finished.”

You can say a lot about Zuuma, but you can’t say he isn’t professional.

“You’re wasting your breath trying to persuade him.” Amelia straightened her back and pointed fiercely at Zuuma.

Oh, and a speech *is gonna show him the error of his ways?*

“Ye who walks the path of darkness!” she cried. “You hire yourself out to take the lives of others. If you do not repent the blood on your hands, you cannot be saved! If the law does not punish you, then *I* shall—in Heaven’s name!”

I didn’t know why she couldn’t just say, “Prepare thyself to get thy ass kicked.” It was direct and had a nice hint of menace to it. But telling Amelia to keep it short is like trying to teach a grizzly bear to waltz—a lesson in complete and painful futility.

“If there is no human heart left within you,” Amelia boomed, “then—”

“Flare Arrow!”

The ten flaming arrows I’d chanted for during her speech sped for their mark—right in the middle of Zuuma’s stupid face.

“Dam Eon,” Zuuma muttered.

That very instant, the arrows—the ones that were supposed to nail Zuuma between the eyes—scattered in all directions.

“What?!” Amelia and I both gasped. He’d been a split- second

from *visage flambé!*

Zuuma, apparently, had anticipated my attack and managed to chant his own counter-spell. What really bothered me was that I'd never even *heard* of his spell.

Suddenly Zuuma took off at a sprint right for me.

I tried to come up with my next spell, but Zuuma was closing in fast. Amelia jumped in to help.

"Oh, no you don't!" she shouted as she tried to head him off. Unfortunately, Zuuma took that moment to suddenly change course —and head for her.

His sudden undivided attention caught Amelia offguard. She flinched, and he kicked.

THUD!

With a high-pitched cry, Amelia hurtled across the forest clearing before slamming into a tree.

Amelia!

Zuuma's kick had been so smooth that I wondered if he'd always intended to attack Amelia first. She slumped to the forest floor, groaning as she curled; Zuuma wasted no time in resuming his mad dash for my neck.

But thanks to Amelia's painful diversion, I'd managed to finish my spell. "Dark Mist!" I shouted.

Zuuma skidded on his heels to a stop, his eyes wide with shock. A dark cloud abruptly appeared in Zuuma's path and engulfed him

in its inky, vaporous web.

Consider it payback. See, in our first encounter, Zuuma had used Dark Mist in my bedroom and had nearly succeeded in killing me. I'm a sucker for irony—especially the revenge kind.

I couldn't see Zuuma anymore under the veil of the Dark Mist, but, more importantly, Zuuma couldn't see *me*. It was time to make a break for it.

As I backed away, I began chanting a lighting spell under my breath. I figured I'd hit him with it as soon as he stumbled his way out of Dark Mist, then—while he was still staggering from the light—I'd nail him with a final attack spell to finish him off. Lord, I'm clever… and lethal, too!

But Zuuma completely ruined my plans to kick his ass.

"Miss Lina!" Amelia suddenly shouted. "Above you!"

Dammit! I didn't even bother looking up—I just unleashed my spell upward.

"Lighting!"

I shut my eyes and threw my body out of the way. My maximum brightness, zero duration lighting spell burst over my head, a dazzling light that felt freakishly bright even against my closed eyelids.

The air rippled with a presence just above me. I prayed the spell had at least singed Zuuma's eyes.

"Miss Lina!" Amelia yelled from somewhere.

Something touched my shoulder guard. Then, in a low voice, Zuuma whispered two words into my ear: “Blast Wave.”

CRACK!

I barely managed to twist my neck before my shoulder guard shattered to pieces. If Amelia hadn’t called to me, it would’ve been my splintered skull tinkling to the ground.

It was clear that Zuuma could strategize ridiculously fast in a fight. I didn’t know when or how he’d done it, but the bastard had escaped from Dark Mist *and* chanted a new attack spell right under my nose!

Since I’d gotten the lighting spell off, I figured he was at least temporarily blinded; he *couldn’t* be seeing straight after a light that intense. I blinked my eyes, trying desperately to regain my balance as I started in with my next spell.

“Elmekia Lance!” Amelia cried.

She’s a trooper—slammed into a tree one minute, back on her feet and ready to go, the next.

Zuuma grunted and pulled back on his heels. Amelia’s spell shot right past his eyes, missing him by barely a hair.

What the hell?! I thought. Was he really blind or not? Unless he could sense movement through wind currents or sounds or something…?

“Fireball!” I shouted.

Flames roared through the night as their superheated winds

swirled and howled. It was a perfect shot: the fireball struck the assassin smack-dab at his feet and exploded.

Against any other opponent, that fireball would've done the trick —*well-done* the trick, actually. But before the smoke had even cleared, a perfectly fine Zuuma leapt out of the flames.

Stupid… ARGH!

It wasn't just stressful, it was downright *annoying*. While I considered what to do next, Amelia released another spell.

"Freeze Arrow!"

It was a good idea—if Zuuma was deflecting our attacks by sensing ripples in the wind, the gusts from my fireball would've thrown his senses off. There was no way he could evade all ten ice arrows!

Right.

With a sharp breath, Zuuma easily took to the air, leaping high enough to evade the entire volley of arrows. I was starting to rethink the whole "he's blind" theory.

Zuuma landed on his feet and charged for me again. As I braced myself to defend, I suddenly noticed Zuuma's eyes… or rather, his shut eyelids.

A chill ran up my spine. He *was* fighting blind—and he was still running circles around us. Zuuma was a true badass.

I fumbled for a strategy, but time was running out. In a desperate moment, I flung the hilt of my broken short sword straight at

Zuuma's eyes. I didn't expect it to work, but it wasn't like I had a better plan.

As soon as the sword clunked ineffectually on the ground, Zuuma stopped cold in his tracks. He paused a moment, then leapt high into the air, arcing back toward the far side of the clearing.

I panted and backed up a few steps. I prepared for another one of his crazy Death Sprints, but it never came. He only stood there, his silhouette barely visible in the nighttime forest, and uttered something.

"Come," he said. "Come to Vezendi."

His voice was low and menacing, but I detected a hint of regret in it. He sounded like a hunter sadly relinquishing his cornered prey.

"Come to Vezendi," Zuuma repeated. "If you disobey me… someone shall die."

And with that, the assassin whipped around and vanished into the forest. Stunned by the fact that he was gone and I still had my vital organs intact, I stared stupidly at the trees for a minute.

"Damn," I finally managed to mutter. "What was that all about?"

"Perhaps it was the reinforcements?"

I knew that voice. That *horrifically* pleasant voice. I spun around on my heels. There, on a low ridge, stood a solitary figure whose black robes melted into the shadows.

"Xelloss!"

The mysterious and decidedly disturbing priest himself. After

our previous adventure with the guy, I was surprised to see him show.

"Miss Lina," he cooed in his disgustingly cheerful manner. "Miss Amelia. It's been awhile. I was beginning to lose hope regarding your ability to defeat that character."

Prick! I marched up to him and grabbed him by the collar.

"Cut the Little Miss Manners act!" I snarled. I wanted to wipe the grin off his smug little face. He'd actually *watched* us get our butts whipped without making so much as a peep!

"W-wait a moment," Xelloss protested. "Come now, Miss Lina."

"What the hell are you doing sneaking around?!" I demanded. "Couldn't you see Amelia and I were trying our damnedest to not end up as blood spatters?! And Zelgadiss is gonna be pissed when he finds out you're following us!"

Xelloss fought to clear his throat. "Indeed," he choked through his clenched collar. "How very… constricting."

I grumbled and released him. My fingers were beginning to ache, anyway. "So?" I asked, crossing my arms. "What's your great big objective this time? Don't tell me you were just in the neighborhood."

Xelloss smiled. "I'm afraid I can't say," he explained. "You see…"

"It's a secret?" Amelia tiredly walked up. Xelloss smiled at her and raised a forefinger.

“Indeed,” he agreed.

I sighed. Prying a secret from Xelloss is like wrestling a ham from Gourry, so I knew better than to try. *“Fine, “* I snapped. “Then what do you want with us?”

“Ah, that’s an easy one.” Xelloss tucked some hair behind his ear. “I’d like to travel with you, Miss Lina.”

Come again?!

“You can’t be serious!” Amelia squealed. Her eyes were wide as dinner plates.

“Huh?” was all I could manage.

“Mister Zelgadiss and I are totally against it!” Amelia clenched her fists. “And as for Mister Gourry, well… if we use flash cards to explain, I’m sure he’ll be just as mad!”

Admittedly, I thought she was a little quick to judge. “Easy,” I told her. I wanted to at least give Xelloss’ idea a fair shake.

Amelia whipped to me. “If you want to completely sever the group and throw away your life, Miss Lina, then by all means let him join!”

“Hey!” I shot back. “I don’t remember you complaining about Xelloss before.”

Amelia sent me a cold stare—an unusual and creepy thing for her. “Then let me ask you this, Miss Lina,” she said lowly. “Do you fancy a quiet life, or should I say *afterlife?* You’re aware that’s what we’ll get if Xelloss tags along.” That one took me a second to

recover from. Damn, that girl could be morbid.

"I don't have a death wish," I retorted, glancing at Xelloss. "I just think it doesn't matter if we tell him no deal. You'll still follow us, won't you, Xelloss?"

Xelloss smiled. "Indeed," he answered without so much as batting an eye.

Amelia visibly wilted. She knew as well as I did that dissuading Xelloss was impossible, time-consuming, and possibly death-defying.

"Just remember," I warned the priest. "Your real problem's going to be Zelgadiss."

"Mister Zelgadiss will be *really* angry," Amelia agreed with a little sneer, jabbing a finger in Xelloss' direction.

Xelloss paused. "Really?" he asked. "Hm." He rocked back on his heels. "That's certainly a shame. Humans should be more… magnanimous."

He didn't just say that!

"Hey!" I snapped. "After screwing over Zel's quest, you've got the gall to insult the guy with a dictionary word?!" Xelloss smiled at me. "I'm sorry. Never mind." He gave an easy little laugh, which did nothing to calm my frustrations. "At any rate," he went on, "there wasn't anything on Mister Zelgadiss' precious manuscript page that would have helped him change back to his original form. All I burned was a simple recipe."

"Tell that to Zel. He's the one who's gonna have to buy that line.

And believe me when I tell you that you've got your work cut out for you."

Xelloss gave me what he probably thought were puppy-dog eyes. "You mean you're not going to help me?" "Gimme a break! How am I supposed to help you if I can barely follow your logic, much less believe a word you say?"

"It's just… shouldn't birds of a feather flock together?" Xelloss entreated. "You and I are like fish and water, no?"

"You just proved my point! And are you hitting on me?!"

Amelia slowly nodded. "I get it," she declared.

"There." Xelloss swept an arm in Amelia's direction. "See?"

"What I understand," she clarified, "is that arguing out here isn't doing us any good. Why don't we take this back to Mister Zelgadiss?"

I replied with a deep sigh. It *was* getting late, and the thought of hitting the sack clouded my thought processes. Xelloss is not a man to talk to without a fully- functioning brain.

"Fine," I said. "Let's head back to the inn. We'll talk it over in the morning."

"Good," Amelia said as she rubbed her eyes.

"Good," Xelloss concurred as he brushed out his robe.

The three of us dropped all conversation and began our trek back into town. Despite the hour and my exhaustion, I couldn't help but worry. My thoughts ran back to Zuuma's parting words:

"Come to Vezendi. "

Zuuma was the absolute last person I wanted to see again, but it seemed like he was hot for a rematch. Amelia and Xelloss had to have heard Zuuma's sinister words, no matter how focused they'd been on the battle.

He'd threatened that someone would die if we didn't show. But who was that someone? I doubted it was one of us; he'd probably meant one of the citizens of Vezendi City. If we didn't accept his invitation, he'd kill an innocent bystander.

Ugh, I thought as I yawned. This could get ugly.

But as we proceeded along the dark road, my concerns started to fade. I just needed some sleep—there would be plenty of time to hate my life in the morning.

* * *

It's weird for me to say this, but breakfast came just a little too quickly the next day. And no, it's not that I wasn't looking forward to the good eats—I'd just hoped for more sleep after, y'know, nearly getting mauled.

Amelia, Xelloss, and I sat in the restaurant on the ground floor of the inn, mulling things over. Gourry shuffled in and gave a loud yawn.

"Yo," he greeted, sleepily scratching his head. "Good morning."

Gourry is, without a doubt, a phenomenal swordsman. The problem is that his talents begin and end right there; if you watch him try to think, you can practically hear the soup sloshing around

where his brain should be. Amelia and I waved Gourry over while Xelloss calmly sipped some tea.

"Mmm," Gourry hummed as he walked up. "I slept like a log last night. Now I wanna eat!"

I groaned, wearing my why-are-you-such-an-idiot? face. Gourry actually noticed for once. I think he's getting used to seeing that one.

"What is it, Lina?" he asked as he sat down.

"What do you *think* it is, genius?" I gestured to Xelloss. "You're putting on a pretty good show here, pretending like you don't recognize this guy."

Gourry looked over at Xelloss, obviously confused. After a moment his face lit up. He wagged a finger at me.

"Now, now, Lina, it wouldn't be nice of me to blurt out things like 'What the hell are you doing here?!' or 'You've got a lotta guts showing your face around here!' to somebody first thing in the morning. Don't you agree?"

So Gourry's Mister Genteel all of sudden?

Xelloss smiled. "How terribly polite."

"Right." Gourry turned back to me. "Now, can you straighten something out for me?"

I winced, severely afraid of what he could ask. "What?"

Gourry narrowed his eyes and took another glance at Xelloss. "Who *is* that guy, and why's he sitting with us?"

Xelloss was so stunned he practically fell out of his chair. He stared at me in disbelief. “He isn’t… serious, is he?” he breathed.

Amelia unenthusiastically stirred her oatmeal. “Mister Gourry is always serious.”

I slammed both palms on the table. “Gourry!” I yelled. “Don’t tell me you really don’t know who he is!”

Amelia cleared her throat. “Mister Gourry?” she began, speaking very slowly and clearly in the hopes that some tiny bit of logic might get through his thick skull. “Remember the battle with the evil cult near Maine Village? The manuscript we’re trying to find?” Gourry’s face held a look of intense concentration for a few seconds, then he suddenly brightened. “Oh, yeah!” he exclaimed. “Right, right! I remember now!” Liar!

“Uh…” Gourry furrowed his brow in thought. “What was his name again?”

This time, Xelloss actually did hit the floor. He got up and brushed himself off, ignoring the strange looks he received from the other diners.

“This is so like you, Gourry! You could be on fire and you’d be too busy picking your ear to notice!”

“Urn… well…” He picked his ear and inspected the results on his finger. “No one ever introduced us.”

Oh.

Once I thought about it, Gourry had a point. He and Xelloss had barely met during our previous adventure with the Demon Lord cult.

In fact, the two had seen each other only twice, and we'd all been so preoccupied at the time that there hadn't been any proper introductions.

Xelloss knew a lot about Gourry second-hand from hearing the rest of us talk, but I hadn't bothered going into great detail with Gourry about our time with Xelloss. Considering Gourry's track record with understanding and remembering important details, I'd figured it would be a waste of my precious time.

Xelloss still looked taken aback, but he carefully extended a hand. "Um," he said, "my name is Xelloss. It's very nice to meet you."

Gourry took Xelloss' hand and shook. "Pleased to meet you," he replied with a smile. "I'm Gourry."

The stupidity of the entire thing made my head hurt. I irritably reached for the bread. If Xelloss could barely handle Gourry's idiocy, I wondered how he was going to weather his meeting with Zelgadiss.

Speak of the devil.

"YOU!" Zelgadiss' voice boomed through the restaurant. "What the hell are YOU doing here?!"

Zelgadiss stood at the restaurant entrance, dressed from head to toe in white. He wore a hood and gloves and kept a scarf wrapped around his face so that only his eyes were visible. Zelgadiss disliked people looking at him these days.

Awhile back, a despicable sorcerer had transformed Zelgadiss

into a chimera—a magical hybrid creature. In his case, his original body was combined with that of a golem and a blow demon, leaving him extremely powerful but also fairly hideous. Ever since his transformation, he'd wandered the world in search of a way to regain his original human form. It was during his wanderings that Zelgadiss had met and teamed up with us.

Zelgadiss' eyes locked on Xelloss. He began storming toward his prey.

"Zel!" I called out to him nervously. "Just, uh, calm down!"

Amelia rose from her chair. "Mister Zelgadiss, you mustn't be rash!"

He ignored both of us, the light of fury glimmering in his eyes. He stopped directly in front of Xelloss; the two of them stared unblinkingly at each other.

"You've got a lotta guts showing your face around here," Zelgadiss snarled.

Okay, I guess that beats taking a swing at his head. Then, to our shock and surprise, Zelgadiss took a seat at our table like nothing had happened. He pulled the scarf away from his mouth. "Now, then," he said. "What's for breakfast? I'm starving."

I furrowed my eyebrows. "Uh… Zel?"

He smiled faintly at my confusion. "I decided to try the 'not polite' strategy," he explained. "It's not bad."

"You overheard me and Gourry talking?"

“Yeah—I was standing there awhile.”

I wanted nothing more than to bury my head in the cottage cheese. Since when did Zel think messing with me was funny? He was supposed to be the straight man! “You’re not angry?” Amelia asked tentatively.

“I don’t hold a grudge during mealtimes.” Zelgadiss poured himself some tea. “All it does is upset my stomach.”

“Huh,” Amelia grunted indignantly. Oddly enough, she sounded disappointed.

What does she want? A smackdown? Like we don’t get in enough fights as it is.

Xelloss pursed his lips. “I get the feeling I’m not exactly a welcome presence here.”

“Bingo,” I replied flatly.

Xelloss started at my blunt reply. He actually looked hurt as he dug his spoon into his soup.

“Actually,” Zelgadiss said, “I’m not really surprised to find Xelloss here.”

“What? Why?”

“I’ve had much better luck finding new leads while traveling with you than I ever did on my own.” He looked over at Xelloss. “I guess he’s figured that out, too.”

Heh. Lina Inverse—always where the action is.

Zelgadiss' expression went grave. "That said," he said darkly, "I want a straight answer from you, Xelloss. What was on the manuscript page you burned? Was it useless, or did it have the info I needed?"

The two men locked gazes. The friction between them was so intense that if anything had dangled between their heads, it probably would've caught fire. Depending on what Xelloss said next, we would either continue our breakfast peacefully or find ourselves in the midst of a raging, inn-destroying brawl.

Xelloss' expression lightened. "Oh, it was definitely useless."

When Zelgadiss continued to stare, Xelloss added, "I can put it in a metaphor for you." He pointed to our pitcher of fruit juice. "Even if you have a recipe to make fruit punch, you can't simply remove the orange juice from it and leave in the apple, am I right?"

Apparently nobody thought comparing Zelgadiss' life-shattering chimera problem to mixing and unmixing drinks was rude.

Zelgadiss remained motionless for another moment, then visibly relaxed. "Fine," he said. "I guess that means you're off the hook."

All of us onlookers let out a collective breath. I was pretty sure I even saw a nearby waiter do it.

Zelgadiss reached for the juice. "So what are you doing here, anyway?"

"It's a secret," Xelloss replied, raising his forefinger. Any bets on how many more times he says that today?

"He wants to travel with us," Amelia clarified. "Or with Miss

Lina, to be more specific."

Zelgadiss dropped his fork. He stared at me incredulously. "You want him *with* us?" he repeated. "Breakfast is one thing, but the guy's trouble, Lina. Do we really need extra trouble right now?"

"You think I don't know that? I don't have a lot of choices—either we travel together, or Xelloss trails me from the shadows." I sighed and pushed my plate away.

Gourry noticed the unprecedented event. "Lina? Something wrong?"

I paused. "There's something I need to discuss with all of you," I told the table.

They must've caught my serious tone, because everyone looked up. Gourry even stopped chewing. "After supper last night, I stepped out for a bit."

"I figured," Gourry said, spitting bits of mushroom into the air. "You were out hunting bandits, weren't you?" Zelgadiss looked at me skeptically. "Is beating up on pathetic thieves really that much fun?"

"Hell, yeah!" I cleared my throat. "Anyway, back to the point. When I was out busting bandit heads with Amelia last night, we ran into someone."

"Xelloss!" Gourry guessed.

"Fine. He was there." Then, in a darker tone, I added, "But so was Zuuma."

“WHAT?!” Gourry and Zelgadiss both yelled out at once.

I was startled—not by their reactions, but by the fact that Gourry actually remembered Zuuma. From the freaked look on Zel’s face, he’d also heard of the assassin.

“Zuuma?” Gourry repeated, crumbs dropping from his lips. “You mean *that* Zuuma?”

“That Zuuma.”

“Gotta ask. Did he have arms?”

“Yup,” I said with a nod. “Both of them, good as new.” Gourry sunk lower into his chair. He scratched his face absently.

I took the liberty of explaining the previous night to Zelgadiss and Gourry. The worst part of the story was, of course, the nasty warning Zuuma had made just before departing.

Everyone sat in silence when I was done. Like me, they were all probably thinking—but Amelia loudly broke the silence by scraping back her chair.

“We’ve got no choice!” she declared, jumping to her feet. “We’ve got to go!” She brought a fist down on the table, upsetting a couple of plates and a glass of milk. “If we don’t, he’ll probably kill someone in Vezendi just to show us what a true villain he is!”

“Amelia,” I hissed at her as I glanced around the restaurant. “Don’t go yelling about murder. You’ll scare the other customers.”

I doubt she even heard me—she was already deep into Savior of Justice mode.

“And for that very reason we cannot allow this to pass!” she boomed. “We must rise up and stop him, for we are the only ones in this wide world able to do so!”

A nearby couple took one look at us and signaled their waiter for the check. A middle-aged man made a beeline for the door, and a toddler at another table burst into tears.

I buried my face in my hands. Why couldn’t we ever do *anything* quietly?

* * *

Vezendi is a decently large city on the western border of the Duchy of Kalmatt. Situated at the point where the highway branches off toward Raltig and Dilse, Vezendi’s long prospered from being at the crux of a major trade route. It also has a hill right outside its borders; after following the highway up that hill, we paused at the top to look down and catch our breaths.

Zelgadiss rubbed a fist. “I’m not thrilled about this,” he murmured.

I turned to him in surprise. Not because he was being a downer —that’s sorta his thing—but because Zelgadiss hadn’t badmouthed the Vezendi mission before that moment.

“What’s the matter?” I asked him. “And why are you bringing this up now?”

Zelgadiss didn’t respond right away. He just kept his attention, like the rest of us, on the city sprawled out below. Merchants and farmers passed by on the highway to our side, traveling to the city on

foot or in rumbling horse- drawn carts.

“I’ve said it before,” Zelgadiss explained at last. “I don’t like going into large cities. I’ve had bad luck with them in the past.”

“It’ll be all right,” Amelia asserted. “If there is a love for justice in your heart, nothing can stand in your way!” Zelgadiss turned to her coolly. “There isn’t.”

Amelia’s brows knitted and her mouth puckered. She probably wanted to say something, but I think his reply had struck her too dumb to do so.

“Hey,” Gourry offered to Zel. “Don’t worry about it. No one’s gonna recognize you with your face all covered up like that. I mean, hey—if you walked up to me dressed the way you are, I wouldn’t be able to recognize you.”

This coming from a guy not known for being the sharpest arrow in the quiver.

Xelloss tried another approach. “Perhaps it would be better,” he commented, “if Mister Zelgadiss didn’t enter the city at all.”

I turned to Xelloss abruptly. “Hey,” I barked. “What’re you trying to pull?”

“Having said that,” Xelloss went on calmly, “if you believe that staying close to Miss Lina is more useful for your purposes, then entering the city is your best bet.” Zelgadiss glared at him.

“Although I’m not familiar with whatever happened to you in the past, you can be assured that any inn in any city will let you lodge with them, provided you have the money.” Xelloss smiled. “Of

course, in the end, it's most certainly your choice, Mister Zelgadiss."

Zelgadiss turned irritably away. "Whatever," he muttered. "I guess you've got a point. Let's get going." "I'm glad you feel better!" Amelia said with a satisfied nod.

Yeah, I thought. *And thanks for all your help, missy!*

Not long after we'd passed through Vezendi's gates, I could tell something was wrong. The citizens were buzzing in low, urgent tones, and everyone gave us suspicious glances as we passed. I mean, even the farmers on their carts and the shopping women and children threw weird little glares and gave me the creeps.

"We're kind of standing out here, aren't we?" Amelia ventured in a timid voice.

Zelgadiss kept his eyes locked forward. "Definitely," he muttered. He was already nervous enough about entering the city; I'm sure the unwanted attention was a total picnic for the guy.

At least Gourry and Xelloss seemed unbothered. I assumed Gourry was lost, as usual, in that vast cavern known as his head.

We halted in our tracks and waited for one of the onlookers to make a move. It didn't take long for a boy around twelve or thirteen years old to sprint toward us and shout, "Hey!"

The boy—whose voice hadn't even broken yet— sounded annoyingly cocky. He seemed to be the streetwise type who'd seen his fair share of scrapes.

I decided to try and make him piss his pants. "What the hell do

you want?" I snapped.

The boy looked us all up and down, then stared straight at me.

"L'il miss?" he asked. "Is your name Lina Inverse, by any chance?"

I resisted the urge to sock him for calling me "l'il." *Kids these days,* I thought sourly.

The chatter among the citizens grew more agitated with his question. I felt my stomach sink a little; someone with a grudge had put a price on my head once, leading to all sorts of not fun. The situation I stood in reminded me a little too much of that.

I took a very deep breath. "Yeah," I told the boy evenly. "I'm Lina. What about it?"

The people around us suddenly burst into cheers. Laughter and joy filled the air as hugs were exchanged. I was very confused.

Uh, will someone tell me if I'm about to die or not? "I thought so!" the boy exclaimed happily as he slapped a fist into his palm. "Sorry, but there're more of you than we were told. Didn't mean to stare so much." The crowd began pressing toward us just as the boy flashed his crooked teeth.

"Anyway," he said, "I'd like to ask you—"

"Hold on, kid!" The voice belonged to a full-grown man who stepped out of the crowd. He was a shabbily dressed, seasoned-looking sort, but he didn't seem very threatening. He bent down to address the boy.

“Look,” he growled. *“I* saw the missy and her friends here first.”

“Back off, buddy!” cried an old lady. She waddled out of the crowd, her toad-like body wrapped in a gaudy pink dress that she was fifty years too old to wear. “I was here first!” The man glared at her. “You’re as blind as a bat,” he snapped. “Who do you think’s gonna listen to you?”

“I’m telling you!” she snapped back. “It was me, you ugly pig!”

The man snarled at her. “Me!” he yelled with all the maturity of a toddler.

Other people in the crowd began to join in. The situation was threatening to get very bad very fast.

“Wait!” I shouted. “Wait! What the hell is this all about?!” Of course, no one paid any attention to me—the bickering just got worse.

“Wait!” another woman cried. “Which one of us counts, then?”

“Me!” Granny shouted without explanation.

“ME!” yelled the shabby-looking man.

“But I was right there when they came in,” a different man insisted, pointing to a spot near me.

“Garbage!” Granny snapped. “I was at the city entrance!”

I’d had it with their crap. I raised my hands into the air. “Burst Rondo!” I called.

KA-CRAKA-BOOM!

A great silence fell over the crowd.

That's more like it, I thought. It's a lesson I've picked up over the years: if you can't put order into a situation, there's nothing like a fancy-looking Burst Rondo to shut everybody up without causing massive property damage. Fortunately or unfortunately, I'd accidentally hit the shabby guy with the blast and reduced him to a blackened, twitching mass—but sometimes you've gotta break a few eggs if you're gonna control a crowd. He'd be fine after a long nap.

"Okay!" I said loud and clear as I put my hands on my hips. The crowd had taken a few collective steps back, and I was glad to get the breathing room. "What's this all about?"

Nobody responded. I heard confused murmurs ripple through the mob, but that was about it. Finally, the boy who had started the ruckus stepped forward.

"A-actually," he stammered, a lot less cocky this time around, "Mister Radok said he'd give a reward to whoever found Lina Inverse and brought her to him." He pulled a folded-up sheet of paper from his pocket and shakily held it out to me.

I snatched it up and looked it over. Sure enough, it was a notice offering a reward to whoever delivered Lina Inverse and her party to a particular residential address in the city. The reward wasn't that big, but it was substantial enough if you were a working stiff. Under the announcement were generic descriptions of each of us:

Zelgadiss, Amelia, Gourry, and myself, but nothing for Xelloss (probably because he'd just joined up). I glanced at my description.

Short, it said. *Loud. A tendency to get into trouble, an unimpressive chest—*

I crumpled the paper and gritted my teeth. *That's enough of that.* I looked up at the boy. "Can you bring us to where this Radok guy lives?"

The boy jerked his head up and down. Scaring the hell out of the citizenry had made things a lot more convenient.

"Let's go," I said, turning to face Gourry and the others. But my

loyal party had already retreated halfway across the street, perfectly content to just watch me solve their problems from a distance. Amelia was actually checking her fingernails.

What was wrong with these people? *When things get hairy, let Lina sort it out?!* I was overworked and underappreciated! As my party casually came over to join me, I ground my teeth together to keep myself from throttling the lot of them.

* * *

The boy led us up Vezendi's maze of cobbled streets and into a decent-looking neighborhood. He suddenly stopped, glancing back at us, and pointed up at a particular house. "There," he said. "That's the one."

The house was actually pretty impressive—not quite a mansion, but definitely no shack. And it didn't have that tackiness you usually find in nouveau riche homes. *Having money* and *taste is a good thing,* I thought.

I wondered if Mister Radok was one of those wealthy, nefarious types who hired scum to do his dirty work. The boy had told us that Radok Ranzaad was one of Vezendi's leading merchants.

"This is where I split off," Zelgadiss said once we'd reached the gate.

I blinked at him. "What? Why?"

"Think about it." He averted his eyes. "If I go in, they'll probably give us tea or something and I'll have to pull my scarf down. The last thing I want is to scare everybody around me."

The chimera's got a point.

"Well, then rent a room at an inn somewhere nearby. After we're done here, we'll meet up with you."

Zelgadiss pondered that for a second. "Fine," he said, then turned his back on us and left.

Our little guide cupped a hand around his mouth. "I've brought Lina Inverse!" he called to the house's gatekeeper, who let us in without hesitation. He handed the boy his reward, which sent the kid bolting down the street in a frantic combination of happy-to-be-rich and happy-to-be-not-dead.

Once inside the house, we were led into a fancy reception hall. We sat there and waited, staring at the decor and sipping decent tea, until a door in one corner of the hall opened and an elderly butler stepped in.

"Master Radok shall arrive shortly," he announced, effectively wasting more of our time.

Amelia, Gourry, Xelloss, and I all traded glances. Did that guy think we had all week? I studied the butler positioned at the corner door; he looked pretty disinterested.

"Look," I said flatly. "We're busy people. Maybe you can jerk around guests who *don't* have access to massive firepower, but we —"

"Master Radok has arrived," the butler interjected evenly. He opened the door to an elegant-looking gentleman, a man of about forty with a streak of white in his black hair.

Mister Radok pretty much stomped into the room. “You’re Lina Inverse?!” he bellowed as he shook a fist at me.

Guess there won’t be any small talk.

The guy was decently handsome and had a slim build. He clenched a single piece of paper in his right hand. I was about to ask him about the paper when a much younger man, probably twenty or so, walked in behind him. The younger guy was dark and handsome — and probably Radok Ranzaad’s son, judging from the ‘ resemblance.

Radok took a few steps forward and slammed the paper onto a glass table before us. “I am Radok Ranzaad!” he yelled. He strode tc the empty chair across from me, angrily sat down, and glared daggers upon daggers in my general direction.

Okay, the fact that I wasn’t entirely welcome was more than a little obvious. But *he* was the guy who sent a whole *town* after me, so why the hell was he treating me like I’d interfered in *his* life?!

“Mister Radok,” I snapped, “what the hell is going on?”

He glared at me a little more. “Oh?” he fumed, leaning forward to push the paper closer to me. “What’s the meaning of this?!”

My patience wearing thin, I snatched up the paper and studied it.

* * *

Radok Ranzaad,
I shall kill you.
If you do not wish to die,
hire Line Inverse.

—Zuuma

* * *

Below the message were descriptions of the four of us, the same ones I'd read in the notice earlier. The whole thing made me pause. *Oh.*

"I have heard of this assassin." Radok took a deep, angry breath before adding, "Am I to infer from the content of this message that I'm being used to lure you here for some purpose? Someone had better explain to me what is going on!"

I wanted to tell him to calm down, but I figured he had a right to be upset. The situation sucked royally.

"We've fought him before," I told Radok as I tossed the paper back onto the table. I glanced at Gourry. "He was hired to kill me once, but he obviously couldn't get the job done. Now he's back to finish his business."

"Which has suddenly become *my* business!" Radok boomed, pounding on his table. "It's not *your* life he's after here! Why is he suddenly out for my blood?!"

Needless to say, I didn't like the guy screaming at me like I'd slept with his wife and killed his dog, but I decided to play it cool; I nonchalantly rose to my feet and rested a hand on one hip.

"Fine," I said. "If that's your attitude, then I'm not sticking around for it." I turned to the others. "Let's get outta here."

"Whaaaaaat?!" Radok shouted, jumping to his feet as his face turned red.

Gourry and Amelia both looked at me with wide, horrified eyes. I resisted the urge to slam their heads together.

Haven't you ever seen a bluff, people?!

"Miss Lina!" Amelia squeaked. "Um, are you sure we should—"

"You can't do this!" Radok roared right over her. "You absolutely *cannot do this!"*

I spun back around to Radok and took my turn at glaring. "Then think a little," I snapped. "Why do you think Zuuma *really* sent you that letter?"

Radok scoffed. "I assume he thought I had the means to find you."

"Try again, pops."

Radok turned even redder, which I figured was a prelude to his imminent heart attack. "What are you proposing?!" he practically screamed.

"Sure," I replied, "as one of the city's leading merchants, you have the means of finding us—and you did, by offering a reward to whoever spotted us and brought us in." I raised an eyebrow at him. "But if all he wanted was to get us here, why didn't he send a threatening letter to Vezendi's most successful merchant, the *real* head honcho?"

"How should I know the inner workings of an assassin's mind?!"

I glanced at the note. "What I'm thinking," I said flatly, "is that he's also after *you.* "

Radok's face went ashen. "Y-you what?"

"Zuuma is one merciless, murderous, giant pain in the ass. But he's a pro's pro; I don't think holding irrelevant people hostage is his style. I could be wrong…" I paused, something I like to do before dropping a bomb. "But I'm thinking someone *else* hired Zuuma to kill you, and Zuuma's using the opportunity to take care of both of us at the same time."

Radok could only stare at me for a second, his mouth agape. Call me a jerk, but seeing him humbled like that did wonders for my mood.

"Wait a minute!" Radok cried. "Are you saying that even if I hire you, he'll still come to kill me?"

I shrugged. "Well, if I'm with you, I'm sure Zuuma will try to kill me first. It wouldn't do him much good if he offed you right away—I'd disappear as soon as that happened, right? So you'll be fine as long as I'm alive."

Not the best of consolations, but there it is.

"Of course," and here's where I got down to business, "this is all assuming I *want* to work for you. I'm guessing you want me as a bodyguard."

Radok's eyes filled with horror. "Y-you're not going to abandon me to my fate, are you?" he asked in a near squeak.

I sneered at him. "If you think I'm gonna risk my life to protect someone as rude as you, you don't know Lina Inverse. You get me?"

So sue me—it feels good to twist the knife now and then.

Radok slowly sat back in his chair, his gaze focusing on a random spot on the floor. He was quiet for a moment.

"Understood," he finally murmured. He looked up, his expression actually sincere. "Then I formally ask you to protect me. I'll pay you a handsome commission, of course. Agreed?"

I smiled. "Sure," I said lightly, giving him a thumbs-up. I'm such a pushover when it comes to money.

If he hadn't been such a jerk about the whole thing, and if he hadn't distributed leaflets with a crack about my chest being "unimpressive" (which it's not), I would've accepted the well-paying gig without much fuss.

I glanced at the butler, who still stood in the corner. He didn't look particularly thrilled. The young man leaned against a wall nearby, his arms folded and his gaze directed at us—he was pretty intense.

"Incidentally," I asked Radok, "who are they?"

Radok sighed and pointed the two out in turn. "This is Raltaak, my butler, and Abel, my son." He looked my party over. "Come to think of it, isn't one member of your group missing?"

"He had somewhere else to be." I waved at Xelloss. "This is Xelloss, a suspicious priest. He's tagging along." Xelloss bowed politely.

Radok furrowed his eyebrows, probably a little bothered by my introduction of Xelloss. But hey, can you blame me? I was trying to be honest.

“Anyway,” Radok said before clearing his throat.

“I would like you to remain here and guard me from this moment on. Is that acceptable?”

I nodded. Amelia let out a breath, Gourry watched a fly buzzing around the room, and Xelloss gave Radok one of his little smiles. Radok took one look at Xelloss and sank deeper into his chair.

* * *

After settling things with Radok, we took our leave. Xelloss stayed behind to keep watch over Radok’s residence while) Amelia, Gourry, and I met up with Zelgadiss. Zel had rented a room at a local inn, so we headed there to bring him up to speed.

The room he’d gotten was a disgusting rat hole, but at least it was cheap. Since Zelgadiss wasn’t eager to risk ordinary townspeople seeing his face, we were pretty much stuck hiding out in one of Vezendi’s lousier neighborhoods. I sat gingerly on a bed, trying not to touch anything.

Zelgadiss listened impassively while I explained the Radok situation. After I finished, he spoke up.

“So… is it safe, us leaving this Radok guy alone? We’re supposed to be guarding him, aren’t we?”

I waved away his concern. “It’ll be fine,” I assured him. “I’m sure Zuuma’s gonna come after me first. Besides, I left Xelloss behind to guard the house. I figured getting in contact with you was more important.”

I got up from the rock-hard bed. “All the same, we should be

getting back. I get the feeling that if we stay away too long, Radok's gonna wet himself."

"Okay." Gourry straightened up from leaning against the wall. "Besides, it's almost time to eat."

"Don't expect too much," I warned him as I opened the door. "He didn't seem to like us much the first time around. Even if he does treat us, he'll probably only give us the crappiest stuff in his pantry."

As we crossed the threshold into the hallway, a strange feeling halted me in my tracks. *Wait… what was that?* "Something wrong, Miss Lina?" Amelia asked.

I pondered a second. "Something doesn't feel right," I murmured. The feeling had only lasted a moment—maybe it was my tired, hungry brain playing tricks? I shrugged it off and let out a breath.

"Never mind." I continued on with Gourry and Amelia. Zelgadiss followed, his face covered again. "Seeing us off?" I asked him.

"Nah," he replied. "Just heading downstairs for a bite to eat."

Like the earlier inn, this place had a tavern occupy-ing the ground floor. I hoped the quality of the food was better than the quality of the rooms, for Zelgadiss' sake.

"I'm gonna miss having you and your extra firepower around, Zel," I remarked as we made our way to the stairs. I glanced back at him. "Do you have a whistle by any chance?"

"Whistle?" Zelgadiss furrowed his eyebrows. "For what?"

“Y’know, a whistle I can blow to call you when we get into trouble.”

“I’m not one of your magic spells,” Zelgadiss snapped. “I don’t always answer to *polite requests,* much less whistles.”

Man, couldn’t he take a joke?

“But think of the convenience,” I said with a playful raise of my eyebrows.

Zelgadiss sighed and placed a hand on Gourry’s shoulder. “Traveling with her can’t be easy on you,” he muttered.

“It isn’t.” Gourry smiled nervously. “But I’m good at toughing things out.”

I scowled at them. And traveling with Mister Angsty and Mush-For-Brains has been a real treat, but you don’t see me whining!

When we finally finished the stairs and stepped into the tavern, the lot of us froze. Something was… wrong.

The tavern was dark and actually looked fairly clean, with its neat rows of simple wooden tables. But on a night like that, when the inn was full of guests and travelers, the tavern should’ve been crowded with people—not dark and empty. Judging from the neatly arranged tables, no one had been there in a while.

“What the… ?” Gourry trailed off.

“It’s our warding field,” an unfamiliar female voice

I quickly scanned the room to find the source of the voice. It seemed to come from the center of the tavern, from a strange patch

of… thicker darkness? The patch was about the size of an adult human, with white motes of dust floating at its edges.

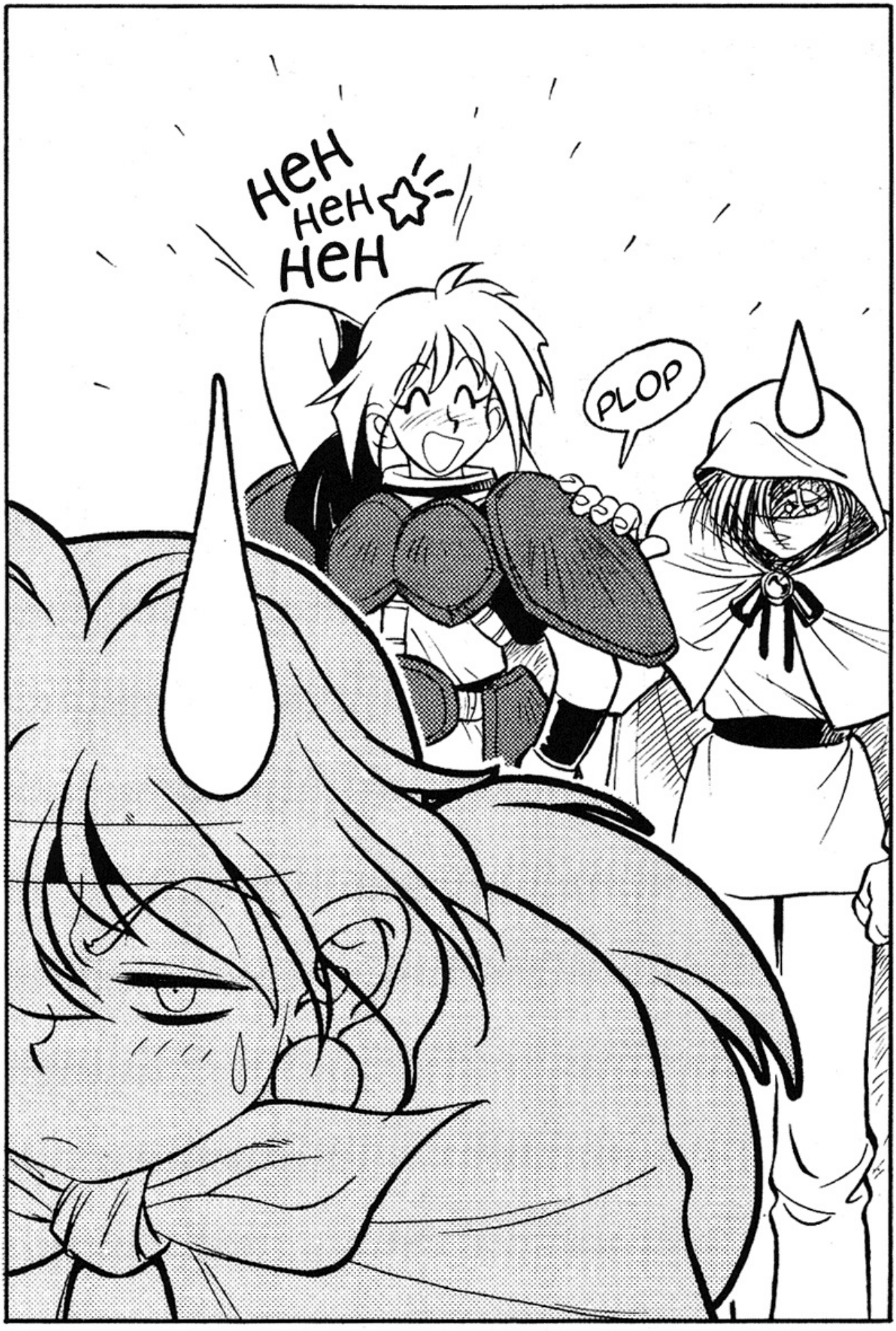
Eerily, the darkness began to shift and move, and I realized it for what it was: a mane of long, raven-black hair. The figure turned, revealing a hunchbacked female body shrouded in a black robe. As the woman took a step toward us, her hair shifted to reveal her face —if you could call it that. Where her face *should* have been was a pale, featureless orb with no eyes, no ears, and a blood-red mark in the shape of a grotesque smile in place of her mouth.

EW!

"Is she a Mazoku?!" Amelia cried in shock.

From the hideous crone herself came an answer. "I am called Gduza," she cackled. "The one standing behind you is Dugld."

I whipped around to face the stairs. Sure enough, another shadowy figure stood there. Whoever the guy was, he obviously didn't have much fashion sense, since he was dressed in an oddly shaped black mantle and a wide- brimmed hat. When he noticed my stare, he tipped his hat at me. The head under the hat was hairless, jet-black, and completely lacking in facial features.


HEH
HEH
HEH
PLOP

I had a feeling things were about to get very, very bad.

“What the hell do you want with us?!” I demanded, carefully shifting my feet. I had to be ready for anything.

“That’s no way to talk to my companions,” said a new but painfully familiar voice from the tavern’s entrance. “This is, after all, a reunion of old friends.”

The door creaked open. A figure in a black mantle and turban stood in the doorway, his face covered by a demonic mask. Although a few of the details were different, I recognized him immediately.

Seigram.

Welcome to Vezendi— Have a To-Die-For Stay

Seigram stepped through the doorway, his boots thumping against the floor. At our last meeting, I'd barely managed to beat him through a combination of luck, skill, and the element of surprise. He'd escaped just before I could deliver the final blow.

As if having Zuuma after us wasn't bad enough, it would be nice if the bad guys we beat could just *stay beaten.*

"It's been a long time," Seigram sneered. "Perhaps too long."

Gourry leaned in to get closer to my ear. "For a guy we almost killed," he murmured, "he looks pretty good."

Seigram was a powerful Mazoku, strong enough to survive Gourry's Sword of Light. Still, I knew he'd been severely damaged the last time we'd fought. Considering how little time had passed, I wondered why he wasn't still off nursing his wounds somewhere.

If we're lucky, I thought, *he's not fully healed yet.* Although somehow I doubted he'd come after us if he didn't have a few tricks up his sleeve.

"The time has come to repay you," Seigram announced. "With interest," he added snarkily.

That's what this party needed—more attitude. Sheesh.

"Is that why you brought your friends along?" I shot. "We're just the opening act," answered Dugld—the bald demon with the weird taste in hats—from the top of the stairs. "He wants to take care of

you and the blond man himself. Gduza and I are here to kill your companions so they can't interfere."

"Is that so?" Zelgadiss growled. I could just make out an eyebrow twitching in anger beneath his scarf. "Those are bold words coming from a low-ranking Mazoku." "You're one to talk, Chimera Face."

He was going to wish he hadn't said that. Or at least that he'd been a little less… weird about it.

Chimera Face?

"What did you call me?" Zelgadiss snapped. "Try saying that again!"

"I said, 'You're one to talk,' you stone-headed *freak."* Amelia looked from Dugld to Zelgadiss, swallowed, then whipped to Gduza. "I guess that means I'm your opponent!"

"Mm," Gduza drawled. "I shall feed upon the agony of human death." The creepy crimson grin on her face grew even wider.

"Enough talk." Seigram spread out his arms as his palms began to glow. "Let us begin, shall we?"

"Hyuu!" Dugld let loose with a creepy war cry as he leapt down the stairs in a single jump. Zelgadiss drew his broadsword from the sheath strapped to his back while quietly chanting a spell.

Though Zel had a decent broadsword, it wouldn't be much help against an opponent that existed as pure Astral matter—there was no way a normal blade could damage a demon. But I was sure Zelgadiss knew that.

His mantle fluttering in the air, Dugld plummeted toward Zelgadiss, his right hand extended. “Bazu!” the Mazoku cried.

Zelgadiss dove to the side just as an explosion of darkness erupted right where his feet had been. An instant later, Zelgadiss completed his own spell.

“Astral Vine!”

As he released the Power Words, the blade of his broadsword glowed a faint crimson.

“What?!” Dugld cried out in panic as he twisted his body in mid-air.

Zelgadiss leapt after him. As he vaulted toward the airborne Mazoku, he swung his broadsword in an upward slash.

With a terrible crunch, the two men collided, then landed heavily on a table.

“Not bad,” Dugld said with a snort. He didn’t seem too rattled by the Astral Vine or Zelgadiss’ prowess, but he’d gotten a deep cleft in his strange-looking mantle.

The clothing that a Mazoku wears isn’t just ordinary body covering—it’s actually a part of the demon’s physical form. So Zelgadiss’ attack hadn’t *just* messed up Dugld’s ridiculous outfit, it had actually wounded the guy.

Unfortunately, the faceless Mazoku just shook out his mantle. The cut disappeared.

“Did I mention my ability to heal any damage done to my body?”

Dugld asked in a mocking sneer. “Still, fusing a normal sword with magic; that’s the first time I’ve seen that trick in action.”

I’d heard of Astral Vine before—like Dugld had said, Zelgadiss had used the spell to fuse magic power with his broadsword. It instantly made his weapon effective against an astral body.

“I guess I’ll have to take you a little more seriously.” As Dugld spoke, ten black pebbles appeared and began hovering around him.

Meanwhile, Amelia began her own battle. “Let’s go!” she cried, running at Gduza. Her mouth moved as she recited a spell under her breath.

“Ho ho!” Gduza laughed evilly. “That’s it, come to me!” With her black hair whipping around behind her, Gduza charged for Amelia.

As the two combatants came within attack range, Gduza’s shadow suddenly lurched up off the floor and shot at Amelia. Amelia tried to lunge out of the way, but she wasn’t quite fast enough; Gduza’s shadow managed to reach Amelia’s feet.

Amelia’s jaw dropped as her body froze in place!

Gduza had used a spell similar to Shadow Snap, deploying her shadow for the purpose of magically binding

Amelia from the astral side. Amelia, obviously, was glued to the floor.

“Foolish girl,” Gduza sneered. “There’s no escaping your fate.” She closed in on her prey, her bizarre grin growing wider.

“Elmekia Lance!” Amelia released her spell while Gduza was at point-blank range. The blaze of power screamed between them.

The Elmekia Lance inflicts damage directly to an opponent’s mind, bypassing the physical plane entirely. It can inflict some heavy-duty damage on a Mazoku—*if it* hits.

“Fool,” Gduza snarled as she shifted with lightning quickness. The magic arrow barely skimmed past her.

But Amelia wasn’t done. “Break!” she shouted.

The Elmekia Lance burst, right next to Gduza’s head.

“What?!” the Mazoku cried. She desperately dove backward, but it was already too late; the shards of the spell bathed Gduza’s body.

It was enough to shake Gduza’s concentration. The shadow binding Amelia vanished, allowing the priestess to jump back.

Amelia had cast a customized, sneakier version of the Elmekia Lance. Rather than acting as a missile launched directly at the enemy’s mind, her version broke apart on command into a cloud of fragments. Only masters of spell mechanics can manipulate magic like that.

The downside to breaking the spell was that it ended up weaker since the spell’s power was diffused over a much wider area. It had knocked Gduza off-balance enough for Amelia to free herself, but the Mazoku was probably as hurt as if she’d stepped in an overly hot shower.

“Ugh.” Gduza snorted. “For a mere human girl, you can be quite insolent!” Amelia took advantage of Gduza’s love of her own voice

to chant another spell.

As our friends fought their own battles, Gourry and I prepared to take on Seigram.

The masked Mazoku held a ball of light in each of his hands. When he motioned toward us, the spheres shot straight for our eyes.

I managed to lunge to the side and avoid the light meant for me. Keeping low to the ground, I quickly chanted my first spell.

Gourry, though, decided to charge head-on into the light speeding toward him.

You'd better have a plan, brainiac!

"Light come forth!" Gourry shouted.

A glowing blade of light shot from the empty hilt of his sword. It was Gourry's Sword of Light, a weapon with the ability to transform the bearer's will into physical form.

"Haa!" With a furious slash, Gourry cleaved the glowing orb in half. It fizzled with a loud buzzing noise. Gourry paid it no attention —he continued his full-speed charge for Seigram.

I finished chanting my own Elmekia Lance. Unfortunately, it was still too soon to act: I knew Seigram could teleport with his ability to control darkness. If I attacked him right then, he could simultaneously avoid both my attack and Gourry's.

I figured I'd let Seigram dodge Gourry's attack by pulling his vanishing act. Then, the moment he reappeared, I'd pound him with my own spell.

And yes—all my plans are that clever.

Lifting his sword high over his head, Gourry swung down with all his might.

But then Seigram did something I didn't expect—he jumped!

Vaulting straight up, Seigram easily dodged Gourry's swing. In fact, Gourry looked like an absolute moron as he charged, roaring a fearsome battle cry as he ran right under

Seigram's legs. Seigram formed another pair of glowing spheres in midair.

"What the—?!" Gourry screeched to a stop, jerking his head around. Seigram used the moment to attack.

CHOOM!

Gourry's reflexes barely saved him. He whipped around, scattering the balls with a wild swing of his sword. While he was occupied with that, Seigram dropped back to the floor and spun a kick into Gourry's gut.

Crap! I thought as Gourry flew across the tavern. I released my Elmekia Lance, hoping Seigram was too busy kicking the tar out of my partner to notice.

With unbelievable reflexes, the white-masked Mazoku launched a light from his left hand and deflected my spell in midair.

So much for my big sneak attack.

"Ow!" Gourry grunted as he pushed himself to his feet. He ruefully rubbed his backside.

It could've been much worse, that was for sure. My guess was that Gourry had managed to leap backward just before Seigram's kick had connected. By moving in the same direction as the kick, he'd softened the blow substantially.

"You'd probably be better off staying down," Seigram called lightly to Gourry. "Or perhaps you'd like me to put you down… permanently?" Pleased with his wit, Seigram cackled.

There was no longer any question in my mind. Seigram hadn't only recovered from our last fight, he'd actually grown *stronger*. Not to mention more annoying.

"Come on, rock-for-brains!" Dugld taunted on the other side of the room. He beckoned Zelgadiss closer.

"You're dead," Zelgadiss growled, completely uncreatively.

"One!" On Dugld's command, one of the dark pebbles hovering in orbit around him shot straight at Zelgadiss.

With a slash of his magic-infused broadsword, Zelgadiss easily shattered it.

"So you're not completely useless," Dugld commented.

"All right… two!"

Another of the pebbles flew at Zelgadiss, this one approaching at a strange angle. Zelgadiss sliced it just as easily.

"Three!"

Another pebble gone.

While Dugld tried the same thing over and over and expected different results, Zelgadiss slowly pressed forward. Dugld backed away, trying to keep space between them, but eventually backed up against the wall.

Zelgadiss completed his spell. “Goz Vu Rou!” he boomed.

A black shadow rose up from the floor and shot for the trapped demon. It was another spell that targets an enemy’s astral side—if it hit, Dugld would be in serious trouble.

“Not bad!” Dugld called. He sent the remaining pebbles hurtling at the magic shadow.

Thwack! Ping!

Tiny flares of black plasma scattered as the pebbles slammed into the shadow. The collision caused both spells to mutually annihilate. With the pebbles gone, nothing stood between Zelgadiss and his opponent. Zel charged Dugld, swinging his broadsword with all his might.

Dugld took one step backward and vanished into the wall.

“What?!” Zelgadiss cried.

CHUNK!

Zel accidentally buried the broadsword deep into the wood of the wall.

“That was close,” Dugld mocked, his voice emanating from the floorboards behind Zelgadiss. “I thought for sure you had me that time.”

Zelgadiss yanked his sword free and spun around just as Dugld rose from within the floor. The Mazoku obviously knew his way around some sneaky tricks. Either the warding field in the tavern gave him the advantage, or he wasn't as much of a pushover as his stupid hat implied.

Dugld saluted Zelgadiss. "I see you can chant Goz Vu Rou even while you're maintaining a magic sword. That's pretty impressive, freak show."

The dark pebbles appeared again, orbiting wildly around Dugld's head. Zelgadiss just charged. "Whatever; it's your funeral."

This time, Dugld didn't retreat—he stood his ground and shot all of the darkness pebbles in one rapid-fire volley.

Zelgadiss whipped his sword around and tried to deflect as many of the pebbles as possible. He batted away most of them, but he couldn't stop them all; one slammed into his left shoulder while another grazed his opposite leg.

It still wasn't enough to stop his charge. Before Dugld could even think of defending himself, Zelgadiss plunged his sword into the demon s body. Dugld let out a bloodcurdling scream.

* * *

Amelia still had her hands full.

Gduza screeched and lunged forward, closing the distance between her and Amelia. As she ran, her thick hair started acting oddly—it didn't stream out behind her the way you'd expect, but instead whipped around her shoulders as if strange, otherworldly

breezes pushed it.

Then something even weirder happened: the hair extended at Amelia!

Amelia reached out with her left hand and caught a thick section of the demonic hair. Gduza's smile broadened; the hair wrapped around Amelia's arm, then tightened with a jerking motion. Something in Amelia's arm broke with a sickening snap.

Amelia didn't even flinch. She just slammed her other fist into Gduza's unprotected belly.

"Elmekia Lance!" Amelia shouted, releasing the spell directly into the Mazoku's body.

Gduza shrieked in pain. She leapt backward, dragging her hair off Amelia's crushed arm in the process.

"Y-you stupid human!" Gduza screamed as she staggered back. The spell had definitely done some damage, but it wasn't enough to stop her. "You would sacrifice your arm just to gain an opportunity to attack?!"

Amelia shifted her feet. "To win a battle sometimes takes a bit of insanity," she affirmed. "It's a risk I gladly take!"

Despite the resolve on her face, Amelia was obviously hurting—the sweat pouring down her forehead was proof of that.

"Hmm." Gduza paused. "Perhaps I misjudged you." Amelia just ignored her and started chanting her next spell.

"I had planned to kill you slowly while feeding on your fear and

pain," Gduza drawled as she held out her palms. "But it seems I can't afford to dawdle."

She plunged her hands into the shadow that she cast on the floor. Her hands disappeared into the blackness up to her wrists.

Amelia shuddered as something suddenly gripped her ankles; she looked down to discover Gduza's hands emerging from her own shadow.

"Hee hee hee!" Gduza cackled evilly. "It's time I crushed every bone in your body!" Her hair grew and straightened, dipping into her shadow. Strands crept up like snakes around Amelia's legs.

Gduza suddenly stopped. Her eyes widened, and she whipped her head up at Amelia.

"Not *that* spell, you little brat!"

Gduza, apparently, had started to listen to Amelia's chant—the one for Ra Tilt.

Regarded as the strongest attack spell in Shamanic Magic, Ra Tilt concentrates all its lethal power on a single opponent. The spell inflicts damage from the astral side— which means it can smash the hell out of a Mazoku.

"Damn!" Gduza snarled as she released her grip on Amelia's legs. Her pale face turned as black as the rest of her body, apparently the first step of her magical retreat.

But she was already too late; Amelia had finished chanting.

"Ra Tilt!"

A pillar of blue flames roared up around Gduza's body. Before the Mazoku could shriek, the flames engulfed her cringing form.

* * *

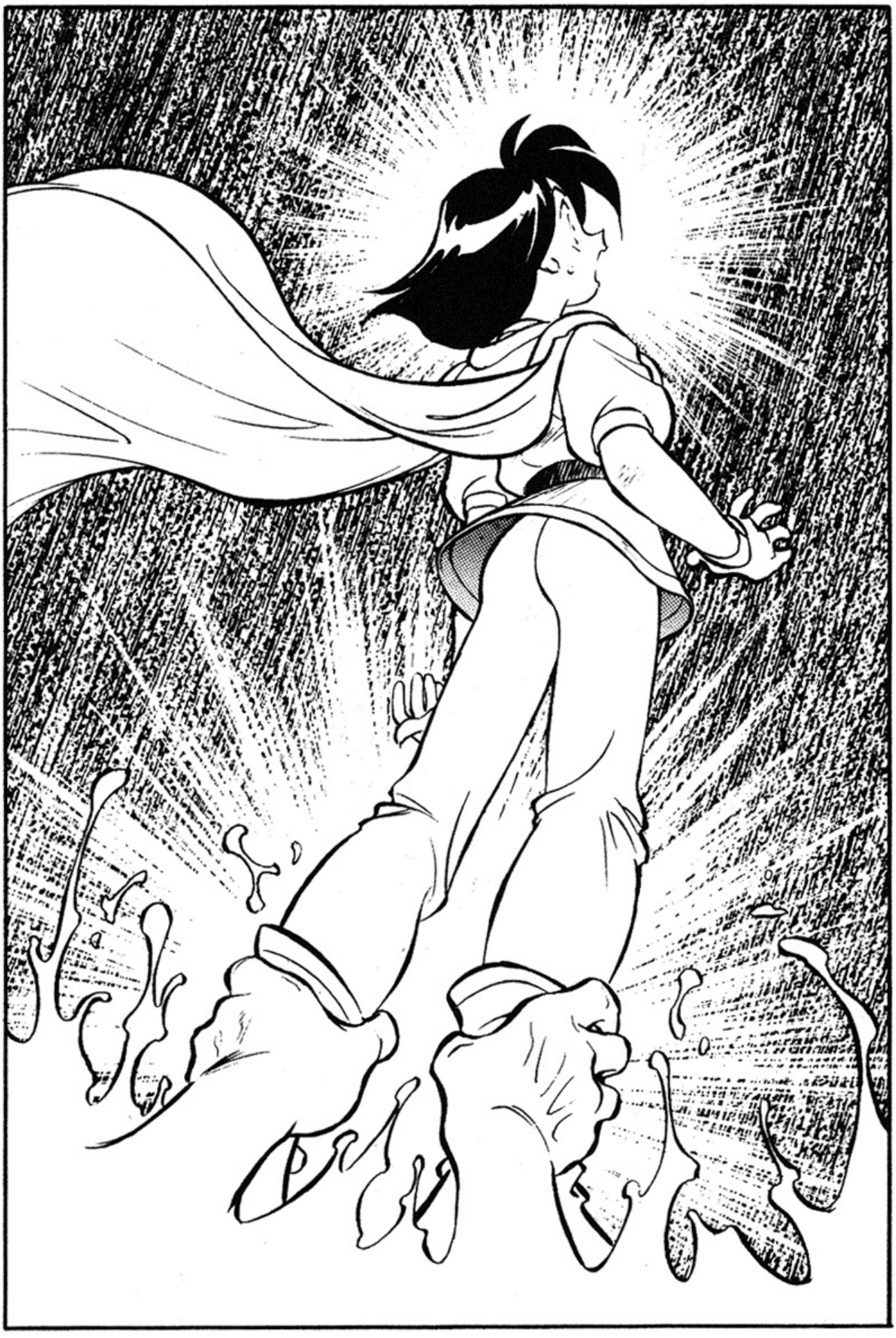
Gourry wiped the dust off his clothes. He seemed pretty unbothered, considering Seigram had just kicked him halfway across the restaurant. With a resolute smile, Gourry readied his Sword of Light.

"You've changed your style a little since last time," he explained to Seigram. "Sorry, I'm just trying to get used to it."

I wanted to tell Gourry to knock off the snide remarks. I was already skeptical about our chances, and goading Seigram into fighting even uglier wasn't exactly in our best interest.

What frustrated me the most was that we were stuck in close quarters. If we'd been out in the wilderness somewhere, I could've used some distance and ended things with Dragon Slave. I knew that Gourry, at the very least, would get hurt if I cast a big destructive spell in the tavern; and hell, if I was really off the mark, I could turn the entire block into a crater. I had to keep a lid on things.

Besides, the Mazoku warding field had probably shifted us into some kind of pocket dimension. I had no idea how it would stand up against something as lethal as Dragon Slave—or if it would keep the real world from feeling the blow.



Since none of my small-scale offensive spells could hurt Seigram much, all I could do was send baby snipes from the side and try to avoid hitting Gourry. The Elmekia Lance fit that purpose nicely.

Gourry charged at Seigram again, and Seigram strode forward to meet him head-on. It proved Gourry's point— that Seigram's fighting style really *had* changed.

Seigram used to stand perfectly still, luring in his opponents, and then teleport himself to a different spot nearby. It was a dirty trick that was, unfortunately, really effective against us. But he hadn't teleported once since entering the tavern that day—did he think the old idea was lame, or was there something else going on?

Maybe he hasn't *really recovered!* I thought. Well… not so much "thought" as "prayed."

Gourry slashed downward at Seigram. A magic light erupted from Seigram's right palm and actually blocked the Sword of Light, which, well, sucked. With Gourry's blade stopped for the moment, Seigram took the opportunity to aim another kick at Gourry's stomach. But Gourry was ready this time; he brought up his own foot to block.

Seigram pulled back and retreated a few steps. Wanting to keep on the offensive, Gourry pushed forward and swiped low at the Mazoku's torso. Seigram tried to pull his sword-deflecting trick again by twisting his glowing left palm, but Gourry saw it coming and adjusted his attack to strike Seigram's arm instead. Seigram still managed to block the incoming blade with one palm while aiming the other at Gourry.

BLAM!

My Elmekia Lance hit the free palm and blasted the magic light into nothing. Gourry was saved, just like I'd planned! And no, the fact that I'd been aiming for Seigram's head didn't make the move any less kickass.

The spell surprised Gourry and Seigram so much that they both jumped back. They'd probably forgotten that I even existed.

Unfortunately, my attack didn't stall them for long; the moment Gourry's feet touched ground, he sprang for Seigram again. I kept alert for another opening, but I doubted I would get one—the two of them fought too close together for me to get a clean shot. Seigram was also proving to be ridiculously fast, practically matching Gourry blow-for-blow in close combat. Do you know how many people can actually match Gourry blow-for-blow in close combat?

As I watched the fight, trying to distinguish the two blurs, I sincerely hoped that we weren't completely screwed.

* * *

From across the room, Dugld's scream hung feebly in the air before dying out completely. Zelgadiss stared down at the slumped body of his foe.

"Fooled ya." Dugld suddenly lifted his head. The sword was still embedded in his gut, but he didn't seem the least bit bothered by it.

"What the—?!" Zelgadiss jerked back.

KA-BLAM!

An explosion knocked Zelgadiss violently backward. He landed across the room in a pile of furniture, smashing them to pieces as he crashed to the floor.

"That was careless of you," Dugld said with a chuckle. "Although I should thank you for the blatant opportunity, stoner. Draining the magic out of your sword was simple with it stuck in me like this."

Dugld nonchalantly pulled the sword out of his belly and tossed it back at Zelgadiss. With that taken care of, he turned to Amelia.

"Nngh…"

Dugld glanced back at the sound. Zelgadiss, breathing heavily, pulled himself from the wreckage.

"Well, well," Dugld hummed.

Zelgadiss carefully got to his feet. He bent down to recover his broadsword, his legs wobbling a bit under him.

"G-guess I *was* careless," Zelgadiss murmured. "I zigged when I should've zagged. Hang on a second." He readied his sword again, his lips curling in a weary but wry smile.

"It appears that I was careless, too," Dugld remarked as he started stalking toward Zelgadiss. "That blow could've easily killed a normal human. But you're not exactly human, are you?"

"You're usually the one to remind me of that."

Dugld raised his arms and stretched out the fingers of both hands. The pebbles of darkness formed around him once more.

* * *

The pillar of blue flame surrounding Gduza vanished. It seemed that the Mazoku herself had either died or managed to retreat—she was nowhere to be found.

Amelia sighed in relief.

FWOOM!

A magic shockwave slammed into Amelia and sent her barreling backward.

“Aaah!” Amelia screamed as she thudded against the wall. With a dull groan, she slid to the floor.

The spot Gduza stood in was now occupied by… Gduza’s head. She no longer had hair, or even a body—the white face with its horrible red grin just floated at head height. An evil cackle emanated from the floating head, followed by the shrill, spine-tingling voice.

“So!” Gduza declared. “You’ve managed to endure my attacks up until now.” As she spoke, a darkness radiated out from her face and slowly took the shape of robes and hair. Soon she had her body back, exactly as it had been before.

“And that spell of yours was rather dangerous,” Gduza admitted. “But the flames only consumed the astral body I shed as a decoy. As you can see, I’ve already restored myself.” She laughed. “You lowly humans should free yourselves from the delusion that you can possibly destroy us.”

Amelia groaned and tried to focus her bleary eyes on the Mazoku.

Gduza's hideous mouth smiled. "This has gone on long enough," she drawled. "I'm afraid it's time you died."

* * *

Gourry and Seigram's fight wore on, with neither of the fighters managing to gain the upper hand. My group was definitely in a slump—from what I'd seen of Zelgadiss and Amelia's battles, we were losing ground and running out of options.

There has to be a way to end this.

I considered rushing to help Zelgadiss (who was bleeding) or Amelia (who was on the floor), but that would still leave one of them high and dry. No, I had to think of something bigger—something that would stop all the fights, once and for all.

An idea suddenly sparked in my brain. What about the warding field? I assumed it isolated us from the real world somehow, but I still had no idea why the Mazoku had set it up. The field was strangely free of miasma; it didn't seem to be doing anything to power up the Mazoku or power *down* the rest of us. The only real purpose for it I could think of was sparing the customers of the tavern.

Wait a minute.

Awhile back, we'd fought a group of Mazoku who'd put up a warding field to specifically keep any random people away. The demons had received orders to not harm unrelated humans. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like a real possibility—maybe Seigram was also under some sort of order to keep the citizenry from

getting involved.

So what would happen if I busted the field?

To start, I had to get rid of the Elmekia Lance I'd just chanted. I fired it over at Gduza, aiming at her blind spot and hoping she wouldn't see it coming.

Of course, she had no eyes. Did that make all her spots blind spots?

Gduza easily sidestepped my attack. Unfortunately, my sending the Lance drew her attention to me—a slight tactical error on my part.

Without much time to spare, I started chanting Amplification. A faint light glowed from the four talismans

I wore: one hanging at my neck, one at my belt buckle, and one at either of my forearms.

Gduza, approaching me, suddenly halted in her tracks. "Demon Brand?!" she cried.

My talismans weren't ordinary magical items. Back when I'd first met Xelloss, he'd reluctantly sold them to me for a crapload of money. The talismans, when used properly, can amplify a caster's magical capacity. The downside to using an amplification spell is that it takes a fair bit of time to cast—but if I could get it off, which I planned to, the results would be impressively kickass.

"Are those the priest's?!" Gduza exclaimed with stifled panic. "I-I won't let you do such a thing!" She howled before charging me.

“Keep away from her, Gduza!” Seigram suddenly bellowed. “That was our agreement!”

Gduza halted in her tracks and whipped to the masked Mazoku. “Seigram!”

The pause was all I needed to finish chanting my spell. “Flow Break!”

The area was enveloped in a giant glowing hexagram, a flame burning at each of its points. The hexagram only lasted a few seconds, and then—VMM!

The hexagram vanished, and the world returned to normal. Dozens of people and loads of unsmashed furniture blinked into existence.

There was a slovenly-looking guy hunched over one table, eating like his life depended on it. I noticed an old man, drunk out of his gourd, with his head slumped next to his toppled tankard. The old man skittered from one table to another with a platter in his hands.

Almost all at once, the stunned gazes of everyone in the room fell on us.

I could understand their confusion. One minute, it’s business as usual, the next—a handful of weirdos suddenly appear out of thin air.

“Ugh!” Seigram snarled, none too happy that his warding field had been destroyed. His head angrily darted back and forth as he took in his surroundings.

Sensing the window of opportunity, Gourry attacked. Seigram

managed to parry the blow with a new mass of light he formed in his hand.

But Gourry wasn't through yet. Pivoting around the point of contact between his blade and the magic light, Gourry swung himself alongside Seigram and smashed his hilt into Seigram's mask!

Way to go, Gourry!

Seigram grunted and staggered backward, his hands covering his shattered mask. His demon buddies each made a snort of complaint.

"What a shame," Dugld muttered. "We were so close to having them."

"We have no choice," Gduza sighed. "Fine. Until next time!"

The three demons turned on their heels and stampeded through the tavern's entrance. It all happened so fast—our sudden appearance and the Mazoku retreat—that the tavern s customers could only watch in dumb amazement.

We didn't follow. If we pursued recklessly, we'd get hit with counterattacks, and we'd been hurt enough as it was. Amelia had taken the worst of it.

"Amelia!" I called as I rushed over to her.

She was just regaining consciousness when I reached her. "I'm… all right," she murmured vaguely. Needless to say, she made an unconvincing argument.

"Just relax," I said as I crouched by her side. I carefully ran my hands over her, doing a quick on-the-spot medical exam; she had no

threatening injuries, but her left arm was definitely broken.

"I'm fine," Amelia breathed. "I'll just chant… a healing spell."

She started mumbling the chant for Resurrection. *Resurrection,* the most powerful of the healing spells.

You are not *fine, Amelia!*

"How is she?" Zelgadiss asked. He favored one leg as he walked over to us.

"She's casting a healing spell on herself." I looked up. "Zel, c'mere and sit down. We'll fix up that shoulder of yours."

Zelgadiss shook his head. "I can heal it myself, thanks."

I blinked. It didn't *sound* like he was playing Mister Tough Guy, but his sentence still didn't make sense.

"Uh, Zel… I thought you didn't know healing spells."

"Just Recovery." He gestured to Amelia. "She taught it to me a little while back." Then, closing his eyes, he began his own chanting.

The elderly man with the platter—the proprietor of the tavern, I guessed—timidly approached us. "Uh… excuse me," he ventured, his eyes nervously running over our group.

I resisted the urge not to wince. *Here we go,* I thought. "What in the world happened here? You appeared suddenly out of the blue, and then…" The man glanced at the door. "And what happened to the three who barged out of here a minute ago? I'm afraid I'm very confused."

The man didn't just look confused, he looked freaked. But what would it matter if I explained everything or not? It wasn't like the guy would believe me if I told him.

"Oh, y'know," I said with a brush of my hand. "They had somewhere to be, and *wow,* look at the time! We've gotta get going ourselves!"

The old man went pale.

Maybe it wasn't the most subtle exit, but hey—it did the trick.

* * *

By the time Gourry, Amelia, and I had made our way back to Radok Ranzaad's place, it was well into the evening. Zelgadiss stayed at the inn to eat at the tavern and hole himself up in his room for the night.

I glanced over at Amelia as we approached Radok's gate. "How are you feeling?" I asked her.

She cleared her throat, then thrust her once-broken arm into the air. "Fine!" she announced. "We were defeated because we had little knowledge of our opponent's strength, but that has been remedied. The next time we meet shall be their moment of reckoning!"

I sometimes wonder why I bother worrying about the girl—she'll

never be down so long as she's got justice.

The gatekeeper let us in. As we stepped into the house, I heard Xelloss' voice drift in from one of the nearby chambers.

"Not at all," he mused. "That wasn't easy for you either, was it?"

"No no," a second voice responded pleasantly. "This too is the fate of those who serve their masters." It sounded like the butler, Mister Raltaak.

I furrowed my eyebrows. Were they having a damn tea party? And since when were Xelloss and Raltaak exchanging niceties?

I peeked into the room. There, at a small marble table by the window, Xelloss and Butler Raltaak calmly played a game of chess.

Okay, now I'm pissed!

I was so angry for a second that I was afraid my head would pop. So while we'd been grappling with Mazoku and trying our best to not die, Xelloss had been hooting it up in luxury and challenging the butler to a board game?! My initial urge was to take that stupid chessboard and cram it down his throat.

"Xelloss!" I fumed. "You stupid prick!"

Shifting in his chair, Xelloss turned a bit to face me. Then he did what he always did—he flashed his little smile. "Why, hello," he said. "Welcome back, everyone." GRAGHHRAGHHG!

"My ass!" I shouted. "Do you have any idea what we've just been through?!"

Xelloss turned back to his game. "Of course not," he said,

advancing his knight along the board. “And I do believe that’s check, Mister Raltaak.”

“Mmm,” Raltaak intoned. “You’re indeed a fine opponent, Mister Xelloss.”

I couldn’t take it. “BRAINIACS!” I shrieked. “Didn’t you hea me?! I just said the rest of us were almost *killed* out there tonight!”

“I believe that’s your own problem, miss,” said a flat voice behind me.

I spun around, my eyes blazing with the fires of fury. A familiar figure stood in the corridor behind me: Abel, Radok’s son. He didn’t look impressed.

“Am I mistaken?” he asked. “You ventured out even after agreeing to protect my father. You leave on your own, get into trouble on your own, and then bark at your friend like he’s somehow at fault?” He raised a single eyebrow. “I do believe that’s rather rude.”

For a second, I could only stand there—crazy with rage but still fumbling for words. A fantasy popped into my head, involving throttling Xelloss with Abel’s spine.

Well, *maybe* he had a point—a lame one, but a point. But he definitely had no right butting into how I treated my team.

“Mind your own business,” I snapped. “And don’t go assuming Xelloss has human rights.” I thrust my chest out, just to emphasize to Abel that I wouldn’t take his crap.

Gourry and Amelia, standing on either side of me, nodded their

support. Xelloss just examined his fingernails.

"Besides," I went on, "I already told everyone that Zuuma would come after *me* first. Do you have some kinda problem understanding the language, pal?"

My words caught Abel off-guard for a second. Slowly, concern spread over his face. "Wait a minute," he said. "You mean you fought with *Zuuma* tonight?"

I paused. I could feel my tools for smashing his moral high ground slipping between my fingers. I really, really wanted to lie.

But I stuck with the truth; his father, after all, was our client. See? I can be ethical, *stupidly* ethical, ye of little faith.

"No," I admitted quietly.

Abel immediately perked up. "Ah," he said with all the humility of the aristocracy. "I didn't think so." He made a big flourish of brushing back his hair.

Great, I thought. And *he's an Alfred wannabe!*

"What I meant to talk to you about," Abel went on, "was whether or not this Zuuma fellow really is after you and my father." He narrowed his eyes. "Or is something else going on?"

I didn't like where he was going. "What?" I asked slowly.

"I'm beginning to doubt that letter we received was actually written by Zuuma. My father is a wealthy man— I think someone else has an eye on his purse."

Is this jerk thinking what I think he's thinking?!

"To *clarify,*" Abel said with a nasty little sneer, "I think someone short on cash picked my father as an easy mark, then signed a letter with Zuuma's name." He snorted. "And specified in the letter that they themselves ought to be hired as protection."

GRR!

"Wait a minute!" I fumed. "Are you accusing me of—"

"Miss Lina," Amelia quickly interjected, gripping my shoulder to hold me back. She sent a hard stare in Abel's direction.

"In other words," she said evenly, "you've come here to tell us to leave, is that right?"

Ruffled by our anger, Abel sniffed and turned his nose up. "I'm rather delicate," he explained sourly. "The mere thought of sleeping under the same roof with the unrefined worsens my mood."

GRRRRRR!

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Did prissy boy want a fight?! It took everything I had, along with Amelia's firm grip, to keep me from pounding the guy into a prissy little pulp. Hell hath no fury like a pissed-off Lina Inverse!

"Well." Abel irritably brushed a hand through the air. "Since you brought it up, yes—I'd like you all to leave at once."

"SILENCE!" a voice boomed through the corridor.

Everybody (sans Xelloss) abruptly turned. Radok had appeared in the doorway, glaring at his son.

"Abel!" he roared. "This is unforgivable!"

Abel practically jumped—probably from the sheer volume his dad could reach. “Father!” he cried. “I was only thinking of your welfare. You can’t discount the real possibility that these ruffians are frauds?”

“And if they’re *not* frauds?!” Radok demanded. “If I am indeed in danger, are *you* better suited to protect me than they are?!”

Abel blinked. “But—”

“Enough!” Radok snarled. “Keep your mouth shut, Abel!”

Slumping his shoulders, Abel clicked his tongue and dropped his eyes to the floor.

Way to go, pops!

While I resisted the urge to flip off Abel for good measure, Radok shifted his gaze to me.

“And you,” he snapped. “Heading out on your own on this of all days! You couldn’t at least get my permission first?”

I furrowed my eyebrows at him. “I didn’t just ‘head out,’“ I retorted. “I told your butler here. He said he’d pass on the word.”

“And so he did!” Radok scowled. “But that still doesn’t mean I permitted it!”

“Look,” I said darkly. “I explained this to you earlier. What Zuuma wants—”

“Is to go after you first, you said that! But whatever the case, you are now formally in my employ. I shall not permit your leaving the mansion of your own accord!” GRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR!

I could see there was no reasoning with the guy. The very fragile grip I had on my temper was slipping.

Easy, Lina, I warned myself. Remember who's giving you money. Just think of the shiny, soothing money.

Sensing I had nothing by way of a reply—and maybe seeing my eyes glaze over as I frantically fantasized about money—Radok snorted. "I'll let it pass this once," he muttered. "At any rate, supper is being prepared; someone will show you into the dining room once it's ready."

He turned, then paused to dart his eyes at Abel. "Abel!" he ordered. "Come!"

Having said his piece, Radok stomped back down the hallway. His son followed obediently, right on Radok's heels.

I waited until I was sure they were out of earshot before kicking a wall.

* * *

A short while later, a squat-looking maidservant showed us into the guest dining room where a full-course meal awaited us. I still hadn't calmed down, though, and ended up taking out my aggressions on my innocent lamb steak.

"What the *hell* is up their butts?!" I snarled in between hacks and slashes. "There's been nothing but attitude ever since we got here!"

Fortunately, Amelia, Gourry, Xelloss and I were the only ones in the room; Radok and Abel ate elsewhere. The hostility that had sprung up between our two camps would've made dining together

worse than dungeon torture. I'll admit that the steak and salad were tops, but neither did much to settle my temper.

By the way, I'd already filled Xelloss in on our showdown with Seigram and the Mazoku toadies. I always get the facts out of the way before my really big rants.

"Why is Radok so damn determined to be a jerk after we agreed to protect him?" I asked the room. "Is he too much of a pompous bastard to know how wrong that is?"

"Well," Gourry offered dully, "maybe he's not thinking straight 'cause someone's trying to kill him." "Duh!" I exclaimed. "I understand that, Gourry!" Gourry frowned a little, then went back to his broccoli.

"Seigram's attack had nothing to do with Radok," I said. "And it definitely had nothing to do with that idiot Abel, either. They think that gives them the right to be asses about the whole us-almost-dying bit."

"So it's okay as long as you understand?" Gourry asked as he chewed. "Yeah, Abel's a jerk, but it's not like we can do anything about it."

"I understand that, too!" I yelled. "I'm just trying to blow off some steam here!" I thrust a forkful of broccoli into my mouth, then chewed with fury.

"It's not that we don't understand how you feel," Xelloss said in his typically even tone. He cut the chunks of carrot in his stew into even smaller pieces, like a kid or a geezer might. "According to what

you said earlier, Seigram and Zuuma have a history only with you and Mister Gourry. There's no connection between them and Miss Amelia or Mister Zelgadiss."

I paused from hacking at my meal to glance up at him. Gourry just gnawed on his meat.

"In spite of that," Xelloss continued, "both Miss Amelia and Mister Zelgadiss became involved in your confrontation today, and both ended up injured. That's pretty embarrassing, isn't it? And then getting lectured by your new boss." Xelloss shrugged. "It's easy to see why you're so ruffled."

I glared at Xelloss, wondering where the hell he got all his gall.

"Hey," I shot, angling my knife in his direction. "You're not helping."

Xelloss flashed me his little smile. "Perhaps not," he agreed. "Although perhaps complaining loudly to your friends makes you feel better?"

I replied by jamming my spoon into my stew. Stupid Xelloss, I thought as I angrily slurped broth.

After a few minutes of silent eating—well, silent except for the loud scarfing noises—I looked over at Gourry. There was something I'd been meaning to talk to him about.

"Gourry?" I asked, hoping I could get his attention. "Mm?" he mumbled, slurping from his plate of pasta. *Just say it, Lina. Since when does he* ever *pay attention*? "Actually," I began, then paused. "I'd like you to, well… keep me company tonight."

I heard a couple of utensils drop onto plates. Amelia gasped. "Miss Lina!" she cried. "That's very… direct of you!" "Ah," Xelloss sighed, his smile taking on entirely new levels of creepy. "It seems that spring has finally arrived."

I spat out my stew. "Hey!" I choked as I wiped my mouth. "That's NOT what I meant!" I whipped my head to Gourry, but he'd already gone flush. "Why are you blushing?!" I shrieked.

"Uh…" Gourry scratched his head uncomfortably. "Well, when a man and a woman love each other very—" "NO!" I made sure to cut him off before he said ANOTHER WORD. "I meant I wanted to get in some extra sword practice! What is *wrong* with all of you?!" Amelia knitted her brow in puzzlement. "Huh?"

Xelloss raised an eyebrow. "Non-euphemistic sword practice?"

"YES!"

Amelia and Xelloss exchanged disappointed glances.

Gourry frowned. "But that's not like you," he said. "Why do you want sword practice all of a sudden?"

I put down my spoon. "It's true that I'm not really into all that blood-and-guts swordplay stuff," I admitted. Then, turning up my nose, I added, "I don't actually like it much at all."

Amelia also put down her spoon. She'd stopped eating her chunky tomato stew at "blood and guts."

I sighed. "It's just that I can't track Zuuma's movements. I'm left on the sidelines to watch you fight him, which is stupendously lame; I *would* help, but it goes without saying that the bastard would

skewer me in hand- to-hand combat."

Xelloss nodded as he sliced up the chicken on his plate. "That's certainly true," he agreed. "Although I'm not sure a bit of extra training is going to help you, Miss Lina. Zuuma is a formidable opponent and one certainly impossible to beat on your own."

"Which is why I'm asking for help from someone else. I think it's at least worth a shot."

Xelloss shrugged.

I jabbed into one of the heated serving trays with my fork and captured a steaming pile of fried potato slices. "Attitude is everything," I declared, holding up the fork like our team flag. "And nobody has an attitude to match Lina Inverse's." I triumphantly shoved the potatoes in my mouth.

And spit them back out as they burned the inside of my mouth.

HOT HOT HOT HOT!

* * *

The next day, Gourry and I went out into the city together—*after* getting stupid Radok's stupid permission. The man was reluctant to let us go, but with Amelia and Xelloss staying behind, he finally relented.

It wasn't like Gourry and I were out on a pleasure stroll. We had real business to attend to, namely fixing the shoulder guard that Zuuma had smashed.

I just can't keep nice things, can I?

I'd initially bought the guard back in Saillune during one of our previous travels, but Vezendi didn't have the sorcerer resources of Saillune. There were probably only a few places in the entire Duchy of Kalmatt that could handle magical repairs. After talking to a number of merchants, we came to discover that there was only one tiny shop that traded in magic items in the whole of Vezendi. It was our best bet, so off we went.

The shopkeeper at the magic store turned out to be a toothless, white-haired old woman with plump cheeks and a patch over one eye. She inspected the shoulder guard with her good eye and creaked out a judgment we weren't happy to hear:

"There's no way in hot hell I can fix this ugly thing."

I threw up my hands. "Great," I spat. "*This* wasn't a giant waste of an afternoon." It was obvious that, for all the magic items for sale in the musty shop, the old woman herself wasn't exactly a sorcery expert.

And she knew nothing of taste. My shoulder guards are awesome!

"What about a regular blacksmith?" I asked. "Could he patch it up?"

She shook her shrunken head. "No blacksmiths 'round here can work with this material, dearie." Her eye rolled to one side, as if she were remembering something.

"Actually," she added, "this's happened before." She passed the shoulder guard back to me. "*A* sorcerer much like you came in here,

wanting to get a breastplate repaired."

"So what'd you tell him?"

"I accepted the job," the old lady said with a shrug. "But no matter how much I begged the nearby smiths, they refused to help with the repairs. I ended up using a lead- and-iron plate to patch the hole in the armor. When the sorcerer came back, he said he couldn't wear something that heavy and didn't pay me a thing." The old woman shook her head and snorted in disgust.

I rolled my eyes. Well, yeah. I thought. I would've been pissed, too.

"It'll be cheaper to replace the shoulder guard. If you really want it repaired, I'll have to order the replacement parts from the outskirts of Saillune. That could take two or three months to ship—and it won't be cheap."

"Mm," I murmured half to myself as I folded my arms. "Figures."

While the two of us discussed the issue, Gourry took the opportunity to look around the shop. I noticed him stare with childlike interest at all the magic items, turning them over one by one in his hands.

"By the way," the woman added. "Are you a traveler? I haven't seen your face around here before."

"I've been known to wander, yeah."

She propped an elbow on the counter. "Then maybe you should just travel to Saillune to have this repaired? That would save you time and money."

“Maybe,” I replied with a pained sigh. “But I’m pretty much stuck here for a while. I’ve been hired by Radok on private business here in Vezendi.”

“Ah!” she piped, a cheery glint in her eye. “Yes, yes! So you’re the one Mister Radok was looking for.” She clapped her hands. “That’s right, you said your name was Lina.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Ah!” The woman leveled her eye at me knowingly. “So, I’m sure Mister Radok has been treating you well?” What do I say to that?

How that obnoxious, bony-assed jerk had gotten to be so respected around Vezendi was seriously beyond me. I pushed the angry thought aside and instead asked the old woman for any details she had on Radok.

“His father was an accomplished merchant,” she said, rubbing the whiskers on her chin. “But, how do I say this… he wasn’t the most pleasant fellow to have around.

“But Mister Radok.” The woman smiled broadly. “Now, he may be blunt, but he’s definitely good-natured.”

Uh, no, he isn’t.

“He’s not the businessman his father was, but he seems to enjoy traveling a great deal.” The woman paused to scratch her eye patch. “One could also say he’s a very private person, though. Of course, all the money in the world won’t help you if you’re a disagreeable fellow.” She peered up at me, flashing her crooked teeth. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

Ugh. Not only was she rambling, she was getting more and more incoherent by the second. I had to put my foot down—fast.

"Right," I agreed, trying to sound sincere. "Anyway, Mister Radok asked us to do a little favor for him."

Notice, boys and girls, how I said *"Mister* Radok" so I wouldn't upset the old lady. Taking up my shoulder guard, I waved for Gourry to make for the exit.

"Well," I said cordially. "Sorry for taking up your time, but I can't divulge any details about my business with, um, *Mister* Radok, since it involves guard work. But thanks for your help." I took two steps back toward the entrance. "I think I'll just buy myself a new shoulder guard."

"In that case…" The old woman tapped a gnarled finger on her lips and thought to herself for a moment.

I barely managed to keep from bolting for the door. I'm polite to the elderly, but there's only so much time I can waste.

"I *do* have an interesting enchanted shoulder guard in stock," she said at last. "I can fetch it, if you're interested. It's made of Raja bone shavings."

I froze. "H-huh?" I blurted, my wide eyes fixing on her. "You mean *three-eyed-dragon* Raja bone?"

Armor made from Raja Dragon bone shavings is especially prized for its lightness, and is favored by more than a few impressive warriors. But because no Raja Dragons had been sighted in a long while, new supplies of such armor had petered out, and older pieces

had become painfully rare. To find something like that in a little Vezendi magic shop was such an incredible stroke of luck that I just about fell over.

"But, uh," I stammered, trying to keep calm. "Isn't that expensive?"

"Not at all," the old woman replied. "I'll sell it to you cheap since all ten previous owners died under mysterious circumstances."

So it's CURSED. Thank you, old lady!

"Right," I said sourly. "I think I'll pass."

"Oh?" the woman asked. "Then how about leather armor made from stretched Wai Pan wing? That's a different sort of dragon, and it's got a jeweled amulet embedded in it."

I won't get into it, but that was something else I definitely *didn't* want. I wondered what other winners the woman kept stashed in her basement.

She thought for a second, then thumped her palm on the counter. "Ah!" she exclaimed brightly. "I know! I bought something a little while ago from a traveler, but I'm not really sure what it's made of. Would you like to take a look?"

I sighed. "Sure," I said. *It's not like my time has value,* I silently added.

The old lady rummaged through the shelves behind her, then through a narrow aisle crammed with all kinds of crazy crap.

"Here we are!" she called at last. She hobbled back with a pair of

black shoulder guards in her hands. “What do you think?”

The guards looked like they’d been made from the scales of a giant turtle, but they didn’t feel like turtle scale. They had the texture of unglazed black earth, and both pieces had gold trim and an embedded jeweled amulet.

The guards honestly weren’t much to look at, but they felt surprisingly light in my hands. The workmanship was top-notch; they were solid, if dull, pieces of work.

“How much?” I asked.

The old woman waved her hand. “Peanuts,” she replied. “Since I’ve got no idea what they’re made of.” Score!

My intuition was clear—I needed those guards. Still, I wasn’t going to let the woman know how much I wanted them, so I had to play it cool.

“Hmm,” I said nonchalantly. “It’s better than the leather, but… not knowing what they’re made of sounds pretty sketchy.”

The woman looked at me shrewdly, her good eye squinting. She smacked her lips.

I knew that look: it was a call to war. The woman had seen her share of haggling battles. I rolled up my sleeves, matching her sharp glare. She spat on her hands and rubbed them together.

Gross!

The woman proved to be a fierce haggler, so the fight wasn’t easy. In the end, though, I left the shop pleased—I’d snatched up the

shoulder guards for less than I'd expected to pay. I made sure to put on as innocent a face as I could as we left the old lady's store.

"That wasn't such a bad time, was it?" I asked Gourry as we walked down the street.

He mumbled some sort of incoherent reply. I glanced up at him; to my surprise, he looked really exhausted.

"Gourry?" I asked as I furrowed my eyebrows.

He shrugged. "I guess I'm regretting coming shopping with you a little," he admitted after a second.

"I guess being stuck in a magic shop is pretty boring for you, huh?"

"No, that's not it. I just…" His voice trailed off into a sigh.

The road took us up a hill, giving us a wide view of Vezendi against the setting sun. Gourry gazed thoughtfully out at the city, the entire expanse steeped in the evening's ruddy glow.

Man, was it already sunset? All the chitchat and price haggling *had* taken awhile.

"A-anyway," I offered, throwing him an apologetic smile. "What now? Go visit Zel, maybe?"

"Nah," Gourry replied. "It's already gotten too late in the day. Besides, if we're late getting back to Radok's, he'll probably throw another tantrum."

Blech. I almost forgot.

“You’re probably right,” I muttered. After a moment, I looked up at him again.

“You remember what I said earlier? I’d appreciate some sword practice after supper; I could sure use the help.”

“Sure. Oh, about that.” Gourry’s lips tightened and his eyes narrowed, as if he were debating whether or not to say something.

“I wasn’t sure I should tell you this, but…” He took a breath. “When you get attacked from the front, you dodge to the left an awful lot. You should probably get out of that habit.”

Habit? It’s a habit?

“I do?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

Oddly, I’d never noticed that about my fighting style. But that’s why they call them “habits,” right? Because you don’t notice yourself doing them.

“You got it,” I said, flashing him a thumbs-up. “I’m all for that.”

* * *

After our sword practice that night, I was all for my *bed*.

I retired to my bedroom—the one on the second floor of Radok’s house—and collapsed on the comforter like a ton of overworked bricks. I could barely lift my arms, and pretty much every part of my body hurt.

I’d also come to discover that I sucked at sword fighting. Angrily

cursing myself, I rolled my face into my pillow and groaned at the world.

Gourry was right. I did dodge to the left—and I did it *all the time. My* moves were predictable and lame. And although Gourry and I had only used slender wooden sticks for practice, he'd whacked me over and over again. Those sticks may seem harmless at first, but try getting hit a dozen times. I ended up with bruising all down one side.

Not only that, but because I'd consciously tried to change up my dodging style, I'd pulled and strained muscles I didn't normally use very much. Getting out of the postpractice bathtub had ended up as a painful, tearful test of my willpower.

And my self-esteem had taken just as much of a beating. I closed my eyes against the pillowcase. *Just let today be over,* I prayed. *Let me sleep, and when I wake up, today will be over…*

Swish! Tink!

I bolted upright and leapt from the bed. Something had made a noise outside my window.

For a second, I wondered why I felt more stiff than achy—before I noticed the pitch black through the slits in my window shutters. I'd probably passed out for hours just after hitting the sack Extending my stiff elbow as silently as possible, I reached out for the sword sitting on my bedside table.

From what I could sense, there was no mistaking who was out there. So the bastard had finally arrived!

“I know it’s you,” I told the window lowly.

There was a pause, and then Zuuma spoke clearly in the night.

“Indeed,” he intoned.

Gearing up for the Big Fight

A flash of silver light cleaved upward and splintered the window shutters from bottom to top. The ruined wood slowly swung open to reveal a lone figure silhouetted against the full moon.

Zuuma.

Talk about deja vu, I thought. Zuuma relished dramatic entrances, but the act was getting old; during our first encounter back in Saillune, Zuuma had *also* appeared at my bedroom window during a quiet moonlit night. The man clearly didn't believe in variation.

"I'm here," I told him flatly. "Just like you wanted." I drew my sword as inconspicuously as I could, though my muscles still ached.

He paused. "I've no intention of letting *you* slow me down," he warned as he grasped the window frame. Which meant he'd sensed my backup. With the element of surprise gone, I figured there was no more point in waiting.

"Amelia!" I shouted, then dove out of the way.

"Gaav Flare!"

VOOM!

Amelia's streak of fire incinerated its way through the bed before shooting through the room and striking the shutters. Unfortunately, Zuuma jumped inside and sidestepped the window frame, letting the wood ignite beside him.

Amelia pointed defiantly at Zuuma. “It’s been awhile!” she called. “We suspected you’d try to sneak in here like this, so I hid under Lina’s bed. I didn’t want to miss the chance to administer some justice to the likes of you!”

Well, it had *seemed* like a good plan. Even though Radok had assigned us individual quarters, we all knew that I was the one Zuuma was most likely to attack, so Amelia had offered to lodge secretly in my room. Of course, it was no surprise that an assassin of Zuuma’s caliber could sense the number of presences inside a room before he entered; maybe we shouldn’t have bothered.

“I think he noticed,” I muttered to Amelia.

Amelia clenched her fist with gusto. “Regardless,” she announced, shaking that fist at Zuuma. “You may have outmaneuvered me this once, but you won’t ever do so again!”

Zuuma looked amused for a moment, almost like he held back a chuckle. But then he shifted his gaze to me and the humor vanished from his eyes.

Before I could even blink, Zuuma jumped from the window and zoomed across the room for me.

I swallowed down the instinct to retreat. I wasn’t about to leave Amelia alone to fight my battles for me. As if! Besides, I wanted to give that guy a taste of my shiny new sword; Gourry had taught me a bunch of new moves to—

CHING!

The instant Zuuma swept past me, I knew I was in for it. My

brand-new, supposedly kickass short sword snapped in half like peanut brittle.

AAGH! Why do I suck so much?!

Zuuma unleashed a powerful kick in my direction. I jerked back and managed to avoid it, but only through sheer luck. I knew I had to put some distance between us or I was as good as dead.

Zuuma thrust his left hand at my throat. I reflexively bent backward and evaded it, but only barely; I felt the violent whoosh of air as his hand jabbed at the empty space beside my ear.

I threw my broken sword at Zuuma. And no, the move still didn't work—he just swatted the hilt away. Okay! Next?

I feinted, and that pushed an extra second between me living and me getting murdered. I quickly began to chant a spell.

Amelia, angled at his flank, had already finished chanting hers. "Dam Brass!"

As easily as he'd dodged her first spell, Zuuma leapt upward and out of the way. Amelia charged in toward him, forcing Zuuma to turn and face her. She was clearly at a disadvantage—not only was Zuuma way too fast for her, he had far more power and skill than she did. Amelia would be mincemeat if I didn't step in!

That's when an idea hit me. I took a breath and threw out my hands. "Lighting!" I shouted.

In reaction to my spell, Zuuma nimbly twisted his body to dodge it. But my aim wasn't to hit and blind him with lighting; I had something bigger in mind. The magic light flew past Zuuma and

burst up near the ceiling. Light flooded the room, momentarily illuminating the inside of my swiftly-getting-wrecked chambers.

There, on the floor, appeared exactly what I wanted: Zuuma's shadow.

Yes!

I knew that if I could pin Zuuma's shadow to the floor with Shadow Snap, it would nail him in place and solve half our problems. Then Amelia and I could gang up on the immobile bastard and finally end our ridiculous adventure!

But—as these things go—someone always comes along to screw the pooch. I hadn't yet begun chanting my Shadow Snap when someone started pounding on the door.

SLAM!

"What's wrong?!" came Gourry's frantic voice. "Lina, did something happen?!"

His timing couldn't have been worse. Still, with all the commotion going on, it actually sounded like we'd woken up the entire house.

"What's wrong?!" cried a servant.

"Intruders?!" shouted another.

"Is Mister Radok safe?! Has anyone looked?!"

"Somebody call for the city guards!"

Zuuma grunted in disappointment. Obviously not happy with the

situation, he launched himself in the direction of the window.

"Wait!" Amelia yelled. She bolted after him, but it was too late; with a flying leap, Zuuma vaulted through the destroyed window frame and disappeared into the night.

CRASH!

That was the instant Gourry kicked down the door. He flew into the room, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Are you guys all right?!" he asked breathlessly.

Amelia and I exchanged glances. "Yeah," I answered with a sigh. "We're fine."

Gourry didn't look convinced. Amelia flashed him a thumbs-up, trying to cover for my disappointment.

I was relieved, sure, but still a little miffed. Another minute and I might've actually nailed Zuuma. *Or died,* I reminded myself.

Shortly after Amelia and I had checked ourselves for injuries, Radok stormed into the room. I wasn't surprised—since when had he ever passed up an opportunity to yell at me?

"What happened?!" Radok fumed, his head jerking back and forth as he took in the condition of my chambers. "Do you mean to tell me Zuuma was just in here?! And that you let him get away?!"

Radok's burning eyes focused on Amelia and me. As much as the man *tried* to cut an imposing figure, the silly nightgown and slippers he wore pretty much ruined the effect. I suppressed a snort as he angrily crossed his arms.

To be honest, I shared Radok's frustration. Despite the fact that Zuuma had gotten away, Amelia's spell had demolished the window, (and a large chunk of the surrounding wall) pieces of rubble lay across the floor, and I'd lost my door. All in all, the room looked like hell.

"Zuuma *was* here," I confirmed, using my best distraction mechanism: shifting the blame. "And we did our best."

"You lie!" Radok boomed with an indignant wave of his arm.

Uh… excuse me?!

After all Amelia and I had just been through, I couldn't believe that jerk had the nerve to throw accusations at me. I clenched my fists, my rage churning in the pit of my stomach.

"On what grounds are you calling me a liar, *sir?"* I hissed.

"If the assassin had used a spell big enough to blow a hole through that wall, neither of you would be here to tell the tale."

"I already told you that Zuuma isn't that kind of assassin!" I shot back. Zuuma was the type to carry out his assignments with precision; excessive collateral damage just made him look less professional. Besides, it was looking more and more like he wanted to kill me the old-fashioned way: with his hands wrapped around my throat.

"And how can you be sure of such a thing?!" Radok asked brashly, his chest puffed out. "Does he never use attack spells? Did that hole just *appear* in the wall?!"

Like I was gonna admit that was us. I clenched my jaw and kept

silent.

"Even if you *are* telling the truth, in the end you still let him get away. Damn it all to hell—I pay you a lavish fee to guard me, and you only succeed in destroying my house!" He threw up his arms. "And on top of that, you have the gall to stand there and defend yourself!"

"This is why I implored you to throw them out, Father," came a familiar aggravating voice. Abel, apparently, had snuck in behind Radok at some point.

"If you think about it, the ruckus was probably just a charade these two made up." Abel pointed at Amelia and me. "Throwing them out is the only—"

"Silence!" Radok roared.

I was glad Abel's daddy clammed the boy up, because I was just about to do so with my fists.

Radok whipped to his son. "I told you before! If they're simply frauds, all I lose is a little money—but if they're not, I may lose my life!"

"But think about it, Father!" Abel leaned in, ready to argue his asinine point. "She herself said the assassin would be after her first. If that's true, then kicking her and her disgusting entourage out on the street will draw the assassin further away from *you!"*

Radok glared at his son. "Are you saying that I should live the rest of my life in fear of an assassin's shadow? Not knowing when or where that shadow will ever fall upon me?!"

Abel didn't reply. He moved his hard gaze from Radok to me, his lips curled tight.

Radok had a point. Believe me, it's *way* easier to shake off the fear of an enemy you can size up. When you can't see who's after you, you can go crazy wondering when your enemy will strike and whether or not you have the power to win.

But whatever—there was nothing vague about Zuuma, and Radok had heard plenty of stories about Zuuma's victims. Radok probably saw me as a human shield between him and Zuuma; if I faced off with Zuuma and lost, then Radok's best hope was to launch an immediate attack of his own. I was sure that was why he wanted us in his proximity at all times.

The best solution was to go after Zuuma and settle up with him once and for all. If I didn't, I was afraid I'd find myself eternally stuck between Radok and Abel's ridiculous bickering. Given the choice, I preferred Zuuma.

Abel clicked this tongue. "At any rate," he announced, "I daresay we won't tolerate these terrible ruckuses much longer."

"Indeed," Radok snorted. He paused to think.

"As of right now," he said at last, "I don't favor expelling you from our home just yet. Not while my life is in danger." He threw his gaze around the room, letting it drag across Amelia, Gourry, and me before landing on his son. He scowled. "Is that understood?"

Without waiting for an answer, Radok turned on his heels and marched out of the room. Abel waited until his father was gone before making an ugly sneer. “Wonderful,” he muttered.

My sentiments exactly.

On his way out, Abel paused to look back at us. He spat out an expletive before flouncing away down the corridor. I would’ve returned the favor with an obscene gesture if the room hadn’t been full of Radok’s servants.

“Don’t let it bother you, dear,” offered a plump middle-aged maid as she waddled toward us. She spread her palms in a conciliatory gesture. “The master and his son are both short-tempered, but they’re only quarreling because the master’s life is in danger. They usually get along very well.”

Amelia rolled her eyes skeptically. “I’m sure.”

“It’s true,” the woman maintained. “After his wife departed, the master raised his son to manhood all by himself.”

Ugh… I *really* don’t want to think about Abel’s manhood.

I could feel it coming on—a technique with devastating effects, simple to learn but difficult to master. It’s commonly called The Idle Chitchat, and I had no doubt that the prattling old maidservant was magnificent at it.

I’d definitely gotten enough of that at the magic shop. Besides, it’s hard to be patient in the middle of the night and right after being jumped. I knew I had to think fast.

“Sure,” I said quickly. “Fine. Then we’d better get rid of that

assassin, for both their sakes."

The woman nodded solemnly. She opened her mouth to talk again, but I cut her off with a question. "If the assassin came here to kill, er, *Master* Radok, someone hired him to do so. Can you think of anyone who would do that?"

The plump old woman pursed her lips. "Master has no enemies that I know of. Oh, but you never know, do you? There are many troubled and resentful people about in the world. I don't know much about his business affairs, but perhaps the killer is somehow involved in them? If that's indeed the case, perhaps the culprit is Rezak."

Rezak? I wondered. But I didn't wonder long, because the lady didn't stop to breathe.

"He was my former master," she said, "the gentleman who resided here before Master Radok. He supposedly lost his house due to mismanagement. Then again, mismanaging money doesn't sound like Rezak. But if that *wasn't* the case, I don't know why—"

"Thank you," I broke in loudly. "Then I'll just be going!"

"Ah!" the maidservant exclaimed, completely ignoring me. "Perhaps it's a grudge against master's father, then! His father was generous, you see, but some knew him to be quite greedy. I'm sure there were many who resented him!"

"Thanks, I'll look into—"

"Mister Balom, for instance—he's the preeminent merchant in Vezendi right now. But the master's father, when he was alive, was

always one step ahead of him." Talk about opening a can of worms!

The maidservant went on and on like that 'till daybreak. No matter how hard I tried to sneak into Amelia's bedroom, the maid always managed to grab my arm, lean in closer, and unleash another round of babbling. Everything she said eventually became a mangled mishmash of nonsense in my overtired brain; I don't know why she even bothered trying to crack the mystery with me at that hour.

By the time I finally crawled into a spare bed, I couldn't keep my head up. I passed out with tears of exhaustion in my eyes.

* * *

Luckily, nobody woke me until noon. I say "luckily" because if anyone had tried to touch me *prior* to that, I would've ripped off the their arm.

After a quick lunch, Gourry, Amelia, and I decided to set out and make inquiries around the city. The Radok household was just like it had been the night before—marked mostly by a lot of father-son quarreling and simmering hostility toward me and mine—so we decided it would be best to strike out on our own if we wanted to make any progress on the case. We made sure to get Radok's permission and leave Xelloss behind to "guard" (eat and sleep in) Radok's estate.

We also made a quick stop at a weapon's shop so I could buy a new short sword. The blade I picked wasn't exactly top of the line, but it was more than decent. It set me back a pretty penny.

As the afternoon turned to evening, we gave up scouring the city

for clues and instead decided to rendezvous with Zelgadiss. It was nice to use his inn's tavern as a meeting place instead of a battleground— y'know, for a change.

"How about today?" Zelgadiss asked after I'd filled him in. "What did your inquiries in the city turn up?"

"Not much. Since Radok took over the family business, it's really fallen in prestige." I took a long drink from my cup before murmuring into it, "Though he's still making plenty of money."

Amelia nodded along as I spoke. Gourry sat slumped in his seat, probably half asleep.

"Anyway," I continued, "the other merchants in Vezendi found Radok's dad a nasty person to do business with. I can see someone hiring an assassin to knock off *that* guy, but he's already dead." I shrugged. "People think Radok's more of a pushover than his father. I doubt anyone would target him because of his dad's old faults.

"But there's this guy, Rezak. He used to live in Radok's place before Radok bought it. He may need a second look."

"Him? Why?"

"Some people said that right after Radok bought the property for nothing, Rezak got drunk and wandered around yelling, 'I'm getting out of this city!' The next morning, he disappeared; no one's seen or heard from him since."

Zelgadiss frowned. "That may be weird, but do you really think he's our guy?"

"I dunno." I took another swig. "Since there's no sign of foul

play, it looks like he really did leave the city. We just can't be sure." I thought for a moment, then added, "But we don't have time to nose around the city and find out. It doesn't sound like Rezak had the money or the guts to take a hit out on Radok, anyway.

"Radok's house apparently changed ownership two or three times before Rezak, but I doubt any of the former owners would go through the trouble of hiring an assassin like Zuuma, either."

Zelgadiss clasped his fingers together on the table, mulling over everything I'd told him. "So what you're saying," he murmured at last, "is that some *secret* grudge is behind this. Something we can't possibly know."

"Exactly."

Zelgadiss shifted in his seat. "Fine," he said, a bit of spite in his tone this time. "There's something else I wanted to ask you." He turned a hard gaze to me. "What the hell has Xelloss been doing all this time?"

"Playing chess," Amelia replied with a snort.

"That little bastard!" Zelgadiss made a fist. "Slacking off, is he? I'm not surprised!"

I gestured for them to settle down. "We're in a public place," I hissed. "And stop worrying about Xelloss." Zelgadiss and Amelia both glared at me.

I glared back. "Look, you two," I said flatly. "Xelloss is our traveling companion. He's not our friend, and he's not our ally. Got it?"

Zelgadiss exhaled loudly through his nostrils. “Whatever,” he grunted.

Amelia sighed angrily and slouched. “I guess you’re right,” she admitted.

As cold as it sounded, it didn’t change the truth. I couldn’t be sure of Xelloss’ true motives, and because I couldn’t trust him, I *definitely* couldn’t rely on him. If it had been up to Zelgadiss and Amelia, Xelloss wouldn’t have been with us at all… but I preferred to keep him around, in case he might come in handy.

“Zel.” I wanted to change the subject. “Zuuma’s appearance last night didn’t exactly surprise me, but it still got me wondering. Have you seen any suspicious men lodging around here?”

Zelgadiss raised an eyebrow. “Uh,” he murmured, “this isn’t exactly a classy inn, Lina. *Everyone* here’s suspicious, myself included. Besides,” he absently cupped his mug, “this Zuuma seems pretty shifty. If he’s powerful enough to give Gourry a run for his money, he can probably lay low and conceal his powers while he’s out and about. Add to that the possibility that he got to Vezendi well before we did, and we’re looking for a needle in a haystack.”

Zel is usually right. I hated him particularly for it at that moment. “Great,” I muttered. “So our only choice is to wait for him to come to us again.”

“What connection do you think those Mazoku have with Radok’s problems?”

“Beats me. But Zuuma tells me to come to Vezendi, and as soon

as we arrive, *wham!"* I slapped a fist into a palm. "We're attacked by Seigram and a few of his charming friends. That doesn't sound like a coincidence to me."

I stopped to think for a second. "But that doesn't *sound* like Zuuma," I admitted. "I'm sure he'd want to finish a job he started all by himself. He wouldn't want a bunch of demons swinging in to do it for him."

"Maybe it's the other way around. You think Seigram went to Zuuma instead?"

"That's the same problem. Look at it from Seigram's point of view: if he wants me dead, why would he lower himself to join forces with a human assassin?"

Suddenly, Amelia shot up in her chair. "Something just hit me," she announced.

I wondered if it had been a walnut thrown at her by one of the other customers in the tavern. But no—she actually had a point.

"If Zuuma was hired to kill Lina," she explained, "and if he was *also* hired to kill Mister Radok, then maybe whoever hired him for Mister Radok has a connection to Seigram!"

I groaned at the suggestion. "You mean whoever hired Zuuma for Radok just *happened* to have a connection to someone else we fought before?"

She squinted her eyes in a wince. "I guess it is a bit of a stretch,"

Gourry took the opportunity to say something. "Whatever it is," he said simply, "who cares? Sooner or later, all that's gonna matter

is whether or not we can kick everyone's ass."

He sure knows how to bring down a conversation.

I slumped in my chair. "The man's got a point," I said glumly.

Gourry can't follow conversations—I doubt he'd been following ours, actually—but he's still good at looking for the bottom line. If we were going to get through our predicament alive, our only hope was to track our opponents' movements and nail them in a giant fight.

Or a bunch of little fights. A bunch of little fights that could take forever and a day. I sighed. Why were our adventures always plagued with so much downtime?

* * *

After supper, we made our way back to Radok's place. The always-stoic Butler Raltaak showed us into the drawing room.

"Master Radok has been awaiting your return," he intoned.

Amelia, Gourry, and I looked at each other and rolled our eyes. The last thing we needed right then was more bitching from Radok. Still, we were broke and Radok was paying us—what were we gonna do, ditch?

Raltaak gestured for us to sit on a sofa. Radok sat in a large, ornate chair opposite us, with Xelloss and Abel in chairs nearby. The butler then took his place in a corner of the room and stood there in silence.

"You're late," Radok spat out in his usual tone of displeasure.

I ignored him and sat back on the plush sofa. Gourry and Amelia followed suit.

Radok took a deep breath. “Well,” he said after a moment, “I didn’t call you here to complain.”

I guess hell froze over.

“I wanted to inform you,” he paused for effect, “that I’m departing on a journey.”

The three of us gave a start. Abel’s jaw hit the floor.

“You can’t be serious!” the idiot-in-question cried. “Father, we’re in a time of crisis—someone’s after your life! How can you risk traveling when your life is in danger?!”

“My merchandise supply has grown scant!” Radok shouted. “It’s time I purchased more goods!” His tone was even more commanding than before; Abel shrank back from the words.

“But Father!” Abel squeaked. “Surely you can get someone else to do that for you?”

Amelia piped up from her end of the sofa. “I’d advise that,” she said. “Zuuma’s more likely to attack you outside if that’s where you’re less protected.”

“This is business!” Radok roared.

The room fell silent.

“I’ve always inspected the quality of the goods I purchase personally,” Radok snapped. “And I don’t intend to change my policies now, no matter what the danger.” Having made his position

abundantly clear, he shifted his attention back to me.

"Of course, I want you and your partners to come along to provide me with safe passage. It's within the bounds of our contract, so I won't accept a refusal!"

Sure I wanted more money, but what could I do? Xelloss was nothing more than a glorified freeloader at the house, and from Radok's point of view, Amelia, Gourry, and I weren't much better. I knew arguing with him might bring up those points—and I didn't want to risk him slashing our pay even further.

"Good," Radok said with a nod. "Then it's settled. Now, as for preparations—"

"Father," Abel broke in. The younger man dropped his eyes to the floor.

"What?" Radok growled, thumping a fist on his chair s armrest. "More complaints, boy?"

Abel shook his head. "No. I'm not going to object further, I only… ask for your permission to come along." Radok's face turned beet red. "You what?!" he snapped. "Don't be ridiculous, Abel! My life is in danger—this isn't some pleasure trip!"

"I know that," Abel replied. "But as your son, I'll inherit your business one day. This trip will give me an opportunity to learn the family trade."

"But why *now* of all trips?!" The man had a very obvious point.

Abel shook his head. "This is as important to me as it is to you." He crossed his arms and turned toward the door. "I've made my

decision, Father. I'm coming along even if you try to stop me."

And with that, Abel exited the room and swaggered down the hallway. I'm sure he left a trail of stupidity in his wake.

"Wait!" Radok cried out. "Abel!"

But Abel was already gone. As soon as we heard the sound of Abel's boots descending down the stairs, Radok grabbed an armrest and nearly ripped it off the chair.

"RRRGH!"

Uh… calm down before you pop something.

Radok jumped out of his chair and stormed after Abel. At the door, he stopped to whip back around. "Be ready by morning," he barked at us. "Am I clear?" He ran out without waiting for a reply.

Silence hung in the drawing room. The butler stepped out of the shadows near the doorway, bowed to us, then left without a word. Amelia, Gourry, Xelloss, and I were left to ourselves.

"Lina?" Gourry turned to me. "You went pretty easy on Radok. I was sure you'd blow up over the whole money thing."

I shrugged distractedly. "Whatever," I muttered. "I had something else on my mind."

It was a vague response, but it piqued everybody's interest. Even Xelloss arched an eyebrow at me from his chair. I decided to explain before everyone started with the "Tell me tell me tell me!"

"To be honest," I said, "I think I've got Radok's motives for this journey figured out."

"His *real* motives?" Amelia asked, giving me a shifty look.

I wanted to see if Xelloss had picked up on it. "What did it look like to you?" I asked him.

My swinging the conversation in Xelloss' direction made him start, but his ever-present smile quickly returned to his face. He gripped his chin. "Hmm," he hummed. "I'm afraid I'm an outsider in this matter, so I can't really give much of an opinion."

"Just *say* it, you creep."

Xelloss clasped his hands together. "In my humble opinion," he said politely, "this is an old-fashioned baiting."

"Good." I hooked my thumbs in my belt. *"So* it's not just me."

Gourry made a face. "Wait a sec," he said, scratching his head. "You lost me. Who's in the what now?"

Gourry's lost? Notify the press!

"What it comes down to is this," I told the room. "Radok can't take the heat anymore. As long as he stays in this house, Zuuma can sneak in, attack, retreat— whatever. Meanwhile Radok's nerves are frayed and his house is falling apart; the longer this situation goes on, the worse state his home and finances will be in, especially since he'll be spending more and more money just to keep us around."

Amelia seemed to be catching on. Gourry's brain— judging from the glazed look in his eyes—had moved to other topics or overwhelming nothingness, but what else was new?

"To make matters worse, as long as this issue isn't settled,

Radok has to live in fear. I think he's reached his breaking point and wants to try something drastic." I glanced over at Xelloss. "He's using this bogus business trip to make himself a target. He wants to draw out Zuuma and settle everything."

"Wait!" Amelia cried. "But… he wanted us to come! He's putting *you* in danger, too!"

"What?!" Gourry blurted, bolting out of his seat. He even startled me. Amelia's shorter sentences had caught his attention, apparently.

"Lina!" he bawled. "If you knew that, why'd you agree to go?"

I turned to him. "You think Radok's the only one who wants to end all this crap? I'm getting just a *little* sick of Zuuma popping up in my bedroom at night. And think about jerkface and his jerkface son!" I swept my arm out, as if gesturing to the entire house. "Do you really wanna hang around here for months while getting whined at every morning?"

That wasn't something any of us were particularly keen on. "Ugh," Gourry and Amelia uttered simultaneously.

Yeah, I thought that would get 'em.

Amelia let out a breath. "He didn't really think this through, did he?" she murmured.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if Zuuma manages to defeat you, he'll go after Mister Radok next. And Mister Radok won't be in any position to defend himself without a guard."

“Tut-tut-tut.” I shook my head and wagged my finger at her. “That’s where you guys come in.”

Gourry and Amelia’s mouths fell open.

Do I suddenly have cabbage growing out of my ears? I wondered. *Why is this a surprise?*

“I mean, look. We’re already all going on this trip. And suppose Zuuma *does* kill me—what are you all planning to do then?”

“Do?” Gourry frowned. “We’ll have a funeral for you, duh.”

“I’ll probably go through your stuff and see if there’s something worth keeping,” Amelia chimed in.

“Laugh a lot,” Xelloss offered.

Some friends!

I shot the room an evil look. “Avenge me!” I snapped. “If Zuuma kills me, you’ll all try and *avenge* me!”

Amelia looked away. “Oh,” she said unconvincingly. “In other words,” I continued, a little loudly for Gourry’s benefit, “if Zuuma kills me, you’ll be sticking with Radok, since Zuuma—*who you’ll have to kill to avenge my death*—will go after him next.” I crossed my arms. “If I die, you guys are on double duty: bodyguarding and vengeance. Are you getting all this, Gourry?”

Gourry squinted. “Uh, I think so.”

Amelia scowled. With a little growl, she bolted out of her seat and raised her fist defiantly over her head.

Yes, boys and girls—it was that time again.

"Radok!" she cried. "He's plotting to exploit people's loyalties and use them for his own benefit! I refuse to associate with someone so evil!"

I rolled my eyes. "It's not like we have a choice."

"And why is that?!"

"Because we need money to *live,* Amelia. And Radok's our only source of income right now." I leveled my gaze at her. "And like I said, I want to settle this thing as much as Radok does. I miss sleeping with both eyes closed."

"If that's what you want," Gourry commented, "I don't have a problem with it.

A thoughtful silence followed. When Gourry spoke up again, it was with a question. "Just, Lina… what are we supposed to do about the demons?"

Dammit! I forgot about the demons!

It should be painfully obvious that I had a lot on my mind. Is it my fault that half the known world is after me at any given time? My brain can only process so many overlapping death threats!

"D-don't worry about them," I stammered as I waved a hand. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. No sweat!"

I tried to sound sure of myself, but I don't think my reply convinced anyone.

* * *

The next day, the lot of us set out under an overcast sky to leave Vezendi City. According to Radok, our destination was Zeram in the north—a market city where Radok needed to "stock up on spices."

Yeah, right!

Besides Amelia, Gourry, and me, we'd managed to get Xelloss and Zelgadiss to come along. Xelloss and Zelgadiss didn't exactly chat up a storm, and Zel was pulling his cheerful face-covered-with-the-scarf thing, but I still figured we were in pretty good shape. Radok and Abel sat atop a rickety horse-drawn wagon driven by Butler Raltaak—clearly a man of many talents. The wagon bumped and swayed, and the two merchants didn't look happy or comfortable riding on it. That made me smile.

The highway we traveled didn't have much in the way of travelers. Gourry and I walked along the right side of the wagon, Amelia and Zelgadiss kept to the left, and Xelloss brought up the rear; although bandits weren't common in those parts, we'd heard a rumor of brigands while stopping at a nearby inn. We all made sure to keep an eye out.

"Hold on a sec!" Gourry suddenly called, throwing a hand up.

Raltaak stopped the horse abruptly. Radok stuck his head out from under the wagon's canopy, a familiar glower on his face.

"What now?!" he fumed. "What is the meaning of bringing us to a halt like this?!"

I took a deep breath. *Patience, Lina.*

"We're about to be attacked," I told him flatly. "Sorry for the

trouble, sir."

Radok gave a start, his eyes going wide. "Y-you mean *him?"*

"No," Zelgadiss replied as he drew his broadsword.

Like Gourry and Zel, I could sense something out there: a numbers of presences, but none of them very powerful. All indications pointed to a team of mediocre bandits.

The thought of kicking some bandit ass perked me right up. I was sick of having to put up with Radok, his constant bickering with Abel, and the whole nerve- wracking Zuuma thing. It was time for some stress relief!

"We know you're out there!" I hollered at the trees. "Now quit your hiding and take your spanking!"

"Don't taunt them!" Radok snapped. I ignored him and called again.

Unfortunately, nobody responded from the thick surrounding forest. All I could hear was the breeze blowing through the trees' upper branches.

Maybe I'd just caught them off-guard by detecting their presences. "What's wrong?" I asked the invisible bandits. "Are you too busy pissing your pants to come out and fight?"

"Y-you got some gall talkin' to us like that!" a bandit shouted back.

The thickets rustled as a gang of bandits spilled out. At rough count, they numbered around twenty, and they didn't waste any time

surrounding us. But I wasn't sweating it; they were obviously on the crappier end of the bandit spectrum, and I even wished I could have them all to myself.

"Oh, look!" a bandit mocked. "You're completely surrounded! Still feel like sassin' back?"

I heard Radok snivel from inside the wagon. He clearly had no idea how much firepower my party wielded. At least Abel kept quiet and Raltaak seemed composed—one blubbering idiot was plenty annoying enough.

The bandit, though, wasn't interested in my wards. His eyes started traveling in *way* more disgusting ways.

"I do like my women on the sassy side," he said, baring his yellowed and broken teeth. "How's about you and me havin' a little fun, girlie, and I'll see about sparin' your friends' lives."

It was too gross for words.

"Can it," I snapped. "We're in a hurry, ugly, and we don't have time to mess around with a small fry like you."

The bandit's grin immediately fell. "S-small fry?!" he repeated.

"*Very* small, if I had to guess."

"Aarrrgh!" The bandit flailed his arms. "You ain't gettin' away with that! No mercy—kill 'em all!"

The other bandits cried out an affirmative and charged us all at once.

"Flare Arrow!" I shouted.

Ten flaming arrows shot into the front row of bandits. Shrieking in shock and panic, the men began to scatter; though my arrows hit only a few of them, the suddenness of the volley totally threw the bandits out of whack.

"Gourry!" I yelled. "Your turn!"

"Got it!" Gourry yelled back as he plunged into the fray.

I couldn't see the other side of the wagon, but I still heard the sound of blades clashing and Amelia chanting. Behind me, I noticed Xelloss fending off several bandits with nothing but his staff.

I finished chanting my spell—I wasn't about to let anyone beat me in bandit-smashing.

"Bram Blazer!"

KA-BOOM!

A random bandit ate a direct hit from my spell and got blown sky high. I turned to the next charging bandit. I obviously couldn't bring out any major spells, since that ran the risk of blowing up the wagon and my next paycheck; I had no choice but to pelt the bandits with smaller, less destructive magic.

Having to pull punches really put a damper on the fun.

"Too bad," I said with a sigh. "This is about as hard as kicking over the kiddie table."

The disgusting bandit from earlier—the one with the surprisingly good taste in women—snarled at me from nearby. His face flushed angrily.

“Fine!” he roared. “I’ll show you!” He raised his right hand suddenly, then just as suddenly dropped it.

Swish!

There was no mistaking that sound. I ducked as something whizzed over my head.

Thwack!

A single arrow, its shaft still quivering, had lodged itself in the wagon’s side.

There’s more of them? I thought. I quickly scanned for presences —sure enough, bloodlust raged from a nearby thicket, in the direction the arrow had come from. That was my next target.

I began chanting a spell, but a second arrow sliced through the air before I could finish. The horse screamed and reared as the arrow buried itself in the animal’s lower flank.

Dammit!

The horse bolted away in a panic, taking the wagon with it. All five of us noticed the wagon barrel off down the highway just a bit too late to stop it.

I admit that the thought of Radok and Abel stuck inside an out-of-control wagon made me crack up for a second, but it wasn’t the time for that. I quickly chanted a spell.

“Blast Ash!”

The spell I released found its mark, instantly incinerating the targeted spot of forest. The blood- lust vanished as the thicket was

reduced to a heap of black ash.

Casanova practically squealed with fright. “What?!” he cried. “No way! This wasn’t part of the deal!”

Part of the deal?

I wanted to grab him by the neck and find out what he meant, but I had the wagon to think about. “Gourry!”

I yelled, pointing to the bandit in question. “Take this one alive!” Without bothering to wait for a reply, I quickly chanted a high-speed flight spell.

“Ray Wing!”

I took to the air abruptly, scaring the snot out of a few nearby bandits. I saw the wagon disappear just around a bend in the road; luckily, there was only one road for the wagon to follow. Sealed by the wind barrier, I flew down the highway, keeping just above ground.

It’s true that flying higher is safer than skimming dirt, but let me explain: Ray Wing’s weight capacity, altitude, and speed are all proportional to the caster’s skill. While I have the chops to unleash a powerful Ray Wing, the trick is in calibrating the spell’s variables to the needs of the moment—so I’d quickly adjusted my spell, trading altitude for speed. If I was going to catch up to my runaway employers, I needed all the speed I could get.

I could barely make out the barreling wagon far ahead, shadowed by the huge walls of trees that bordered the highway. I concentrated as hard as I could to boost my speed, but then ran into an

unexpected snag.

SWOOSH!

Red-hot flames suddenly filled my field of vision.

"Agh!" I cried, blown off course by the fire. I slammed onto the dirt surface of the road and ploughed for a good distance off the highway's shoulder. My wind barrier, luckily, protected me from sustaining any serious damage.

I quickly dispelled Ray Wing and struggled to my feet. The fire had been Flare Arrows, and plenty of them; whoever had sent them had scored a direct hit to my side.

All right, I thought angrily. *Who's the wise guy?!*

Noises rustled from nearby brush. A second later, the caster of the Flare Arrows revealed himself—and three of his friends.

Lesser demons. That was all I needed.

I had no idea how they'd gotten there, but I didn't have the time to find out. Lesser demons—the lowest ranking of all the Mazoku—possess the ability to neutralize most Shamanic Magic, so they can be dangerous if you're not a warrior or sorcerer of considerable skill. It was a good thing they still sucked compared to me.

I noticed with dismay that the wagon had disappeared up the highway, and, looking behind me, Gourry and the others were nowhere in sight. I took a deep breath and whipped around to face the Mazoku.

“I don’t have time to play,” I warned, determined to put them down as fast as possible. I quickly began chanting a spell.

The four lesser demons roared and sent ten more Flare Arrows at me. I managed to dodge the volley without interrupting my spell, and yes, I’m that good.

“Ragna Blast!” I shouted.

My spell created a black, pillar-shaped warding field around one of the Mazoku. A blast of black plasma barbecued the sucker inside that field before you could say “extra crispy.”

That’s one! I thought.

Without skipping a beat, the three remaining lesser demons continued their succession of arrows. Dodging the salvo of fire, I chanted my next spell.

I couldn’t help but wonder why they were using such simple magic. Were they just trying to stall me? And if they were, why?

As luck would have it, one of the Mazoku stepped right in front of another. Talk about a perfect setup!

“Gaav Flare!” I cried.

The magic flames punctured a huge hole in the torso of the first demon and blew the head off the one standing behind him. The final Mazoku, apparently unbothered by the explosion of his comrades, just kept sending more arrows.

There was no doubt about it: I was being stalled. The concept pissed me off and only made me more anxious to take the last demon

down. It did leave me wondering who had sent the Mazoku… I doubted the crappy bandits were behind it.

"Dynast Brass!"

Lightning bolts, arrayed in the shape of a pentagram, surrounded the lesser demon before skewering him from all sides. When the bolts vanished a moment later, the Mazoku was left a crumbling, blackened heap.

Finally! Without stalling another second, I cast another Ray Wing and flew down the highway.

I spotted a lone human figure staggering on the road before long. I didn't see the wagon anywhere, but I recognized the person.

"Abel?!" I called out, rushing toward him. "What the hell happened to you?!"

Abel looked terrible. His clothes were dusty and tattered, and something had scratched him up all over his face and arms. He hobbled on one leg, wincing in pain.

"I… I jumped off the wagon." His tone was a little meek.

"Just you?"

"Father and R-Raltaak are still there," he panted as he leaned against a tree. He turned pained eyes to me. "Quickly… go after them!"

He was obviously hurting, but his injuries didn't look too serious. I figured he could take care of himself while I saved the day.

"Wait here," I told him before shooting off down the highway. A

few minutes later, I saw a dark smudge in the distance.

Is that it? I wondered. As I got closer, the dark blob did, in fact, prove to be Radok's wagon, but the look of it didn't exactly fill me with hope. The thing had veered off the road and tumbled onto its side.

I released my spell and landed a short distance away. There was no sign of Radok or Raltaak; all I saw was the feebly panting horse sprawled out on the highway.

"Unn…"

The moan was definitely human. I whipped my head toward the woods to see Raltaak slouched against a tree trunk.

"Hey!" I called, running up to him. "Are you okay?" Raltaak grimaced weakly. "I-I'm all right," he answered breathlessly. "It was Zuuma. The assassin was here."

My blood went cold. "Zuuma?"

"H-he said that if you value the master's life, you must come to the hunting lodge in the mountains east of the village of Dufon. Only you and Gourry Gabriev."

So it had come down to a challenge. He'd kidnapped my employer and dragged him to some godforsaken place so I could meet my doom in private.

I clenched my fists. *Dammit!* I thought.

"My," came a voice from behind me. "Quite a mess you've got here."

I spun around. Xelloss, his eyes calmly running over the toppled cart, stood a little ways behind me. *How long has* he *been there*?

"Don't surprise me like that," I snapped. "Where are the others?"

"Tying things up. I'm sure they'll be here soon."

I couldn't put my finger on it, but something about Xelloss seemed very… proactive. I'd even seen him fight some of the bandits. Xelloss, actually doing things?

Maybe he's just getting bored, I thought.

"Xelloss, look after Raltaak." I turned back in the direction I'd come. "I have to get back to the others."

Xelloss smiled and saluted with his staff.

* * *

By the time I returned to the site of the bandit ambush, things were already under control. The highway was littered with smoldering or beat-up bandits, and the piles of them filled the air with the stench of sweaty, unwashed bandit flesh. It was one of the stinkier victories we'd ever had.

Gourry, Amelia, Zel, and I surrounded the bandit Gourry had captured, our weapons at the ready. It was time for some sweet interrogation.

"All right," I snarled, jiggling my sword at our captive. "Who sent you, pipsqueak?"

The bandit, already pale, practically turned green. "I-I dunno," he whimpered pathetically.

Awesome—we get to do this the hard way!

"Bull!" I bared my teeth, trying to look as fierce as possible. "I definitely heard you say 'This wasn't part of the deal.' Now what was the deal, you pathetic waste of skin and fat?!"

"Uh!" he blubbered, his wide eyes on my sword. "This g-guy showed up at our hideout last night!"

"That's not good enough, you rotten sack of steaming crap!"

"He was dressed in black, said his name was Zuuma!" The bandit sniveled, proving he had all the guts of Radok. "W-we usually kill anyone who finds our hideout, but this Zuuma guy had a couple of Mazoku with him, so we couldn't do nothin'."

"Demons?" I repeated. "You mean *lesser* demons?" The bandit squealed and shrunk back. "How should I know the difference between a lesser demon and any other demon?! I've heard of the things, but it was the first time I saw one!"

My hunch had been right: the Mazoku I'd incinerated in the forest had been sent by Zuuma to slow me down. *But can he do that*? I wondered. Even for trained summoners, calling out demons is no easy task. Something wasn't right.

"Whatever," I said somewhat impatiently. "So, what happened next?"

"He said he wanted our help and waved bags of gold in front of us. Tomorrow, er, today, he wanted us to ambush a group guarding a wagon on this road. He wanted us to separate the wagon from you guys; if the plan went off without a hitch, he said he'd pay us extra."

He sniffled and gazed at us beseechingly. “I mean, he had *demons* with him! We had to say yes!”

Gourry and I exchanged looks. It certainly seemed like the bandit was telling the truth.

“But he lied to us,” the bandit added quickly. “He said the guards wouldn’t be that tough and we’d have the Mazoku for backup. But you guys were hard as hell, and I didn’t see no Mazoku!”

Zuuma planned to kidnap Radok all along, I thought. No wonder a million things had gotten between that wagon and me.

The bandit clasped his hands together. “You believe me, don’t you?” he pleaded. “You’ll let me go now, right?”

Amelia stepped forward, her fists defiantly planted on her hips. “We’ll be doing no such thing!” she snapped. “Your misdeeds are many! If you think we’ll just let you go, you’re greatly mistaken!”

The bandit wailed. Amelia planted her feet firmly before the cowering man and pointed a condemning finger at him. “Turn yourself into the authorities at the nearest village! If you don’t, we’ll be after you until you do!”

“No!” the bandit cried. “Not payin’ my debt to society! I’ll go straight, I swear! Just let me go!”

“Silence! Even if heaven doesn’t strike you down where you stand…”

I knew Amelia was going to go on like that for a while, so I just ignored her. I had more important things to think about.

Zuuma, obviously, had finally played his hand. The next step would be ours, and it would lead us to the end. Of me, maybe. But I *hoped* the end of Zuuma.

* * *

Two days later, Gourry and I hiked up a narrow mountainside trail through an empty stretch of wilderness. The sky was overcast, as it had been every day since we'd left Vezendi. I wondered if it was a seasonal thing—or if our luck was just cruddy.

Well, it wasn't as if we were there to look at the scenery. Gourry and I had a fight to the death to attend.

The path took a turn, and the cabin we'd been looking for came into view. It was a simple log cabin, set back from the trail and shrouded in deep shadow. The original owner must not have liked civilization much—it was the only building for miles.

"Should we head inside?" Gourry asked in a hushed voice.

I nodded. We began advancing slowly, checking every shadow for signs of a trap.

I wasn't actually too concerned about battling Zuuma. We'd fought him plenty of times before, and he'd never managed to beat us. Plus, I'd been working hard to improve my swordsmanship. I hadn't had much time to practice, but any new skill might give us the extra edge.

More than anything, though, having Gourry as my ally made me confident of our chances. Gourry had fought Zuuma off almost single-handedly in Saillune; together, there was little doubt in my

mind that we could finish Zuuma once and for all.

The problem with my assessment was that it only worked if Zuuma fought us one-on-two. Zuuma was no idiot, so I was sure he'd called the fight because he had nasty tricks up his sleeve. I half-expected a multitude of lesser demons to start raining from the sky.

I would've liked having Amelia and Zelgadiss along for backup, but with a hostage involved, we couldn't mess around. The two of them waited back at Dufon, a small village at the base of the mountain.

There was something else strange about the situation. Zuuma hadn't just summoned me, he'd asked for me and Gourry. If Radok and I were his true targets, why did he want Gourry to come? Revenge? Zuuma didn't seem the type to hold a grudge, or even to hold a hostage. Something wasn't right.

Gourry and I reached the hunting lodge without incident. It was a small, unremarkable building, without any signs of traps that I could see. I detected one presence inside, but only faintly.

"I'll head in first," Gourry whispered. He placed his hand on the door and pushed. The door creaked open to reveal darkness; Gourry stepped through, and I peeked around his arm.

The only points of interest in the room were a small fireplace, a small table, and a single wooden chair. Someone lay on a heap of bedding in one corner.

"Um… Mister Radok?" I called.

The man groggily turned toward us as best he could with his

arms bound. Despite the darkness, there was no mistaking him—it was Radok Ranzaad, still very much alive.

I scanned the room again for presences but didn't sense anyone else. And it wasn't like there were many places to hide. I didn't doubt that Zuuma could mask his presence from me, but there simply wasn't anything for him to duck behind. And I was pretty sure he couldn't hide his presence from Gourry, anyway.

"What should we do?" Gourry whispered.

"Hold on a sec," I replied, then quickly chanted a spell.

"Dam Brass!"

BOOM!

I thought maybe Zuuma had hidden himself in the pile of bedding under Radok, but it turned out I thought wrong. All my spell did was blow apart a lot of linen, scattering scraps of cloth and goose feathers all over the room.

Radok thumped against the floor as the bedding beneath him disintegrated. He let out a disgruntled moan.

Where the hell is Zuuma?

Right at that moment, I finally sensed another presence—coming up fast behind me. I spun around to face the person I assumed was there to kill us.

I was very, very off.

"Abel?!" I blurted. "What are *you* doing here?!"

Abel—the young man who was on his way to winning the stupidity award of the year—stopped just outside the entrance, leaning heavily against the doorway. Based on the way he panted, he'd probably run all the way from the village.

Radok weakly craned his head around. "Abel?" he croaked, apparently coming out of whatever stupor he was in.

"Father!" Abel cried with relief, staggering into the lodge.

I stepped aside as Abel rushed to Radok and undid the cords that bound his father's hands.

"You f-fool," Radok admonished hoarsely as he shrugged off his bonds. "You aren't supposed to be here!"

"But I was worried!" Abel complained.

Just as Radok opened his mouth to start another argument, a familiar voice from outside interrupted him.

"There you are, Miss Lina!"

Well, we *suck at listening to directions.*

I turned to see Amelia waving at me as she ran up the path, a bright smile on her face. Behind her walked Zelgadiss, Xelloss, and even Butler Raltaak. My guess was that they'd followed Abel after he'd run off.

I slapped a hand to my forehead. "Gourry," I said through gritted teeth. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't we tell them to stay put?"

Gourry thought on that for a second. "Um… I think so. But does Amelia usually listen to you?"

“My, my,” came an eerily familiar voice from nearby. “You brought quite a crowd, despite being ordered to come alone.”

I spun around. A white shape, hanging in midair at head height, suddenly released countless black tentacles to whip out in all directions. The tentacles melded together to form an all-too-familiar shape—a hunched, robed body topped with an enormous mass of black hair.

Amelia froze in her tracks. “Gduza?!” she cried out in alarm.

I admit it was baffling. I was there to square off with Zuuma, so why was one of *Seigram’s* minions there? I already had one fight-to-the-death appointment that day; you can’t just go canceling those things!

“Well, well,” said another voice from somewhere in the woods. “Looks like we’ve got quite a party going on. “ Dugld slowly and deliberately stepped out from the forest. He nodded at Zelgadiss.

“We meet again, eh, Chimera Boy?” he called as he tipped his stupid floppy hat in greeting. “I wish I could tell you I came here to exact revenge, but calling this mess ‘revenge’ would be giving it too much credit.” He sighed. “Let’s end this already, Raltaak.”

Oh, dear lord. The butler’s behind all this?!

“Wha—?!” Amelia, Gourry, Zelgadiss, and I all blurted in unison.

“Mmm.” Raltaak stepped forward calmly. “Indeed, I think you’re right.”

The nondescript butler began chanting a spell under his breath. I

could just make out his words through a growing reverberation that filled the air— words unpronounceable to the human tongue somehow spilled from the man's lips. From the forest surrounding us came the sounds of animals running in panic. A cloud of gnats shot past me with an unnatural degree of purpose.

The animals could obviously sense as well as I could that something very bad was about to happen.

"Ooo… Nnn…"

Believe it or not, those were Power Words. The air around us pulsed, before suddenly—

ZWIIIING!

I cringed as a sharp ringing filled the air. In the forest, where moments before every bird and beast had been screaming in fear, everything fell into a deafening silence.

"This certainly is a predicament." Xelloss sighed, sounding about as bothered as if he'd stepped in a pile of dog poop. "Things are getting a bit out of hand, don't you think?"

"It's much more interesting this way," Raltaak replied, matching Xelloss' composure.

What are they talking about?! I thought. *And why is Xelloss so friendly with Raltaak?!*

The sounds of the forest animals returned, but a creepy new timbre to their cries sent ice rushing through my veins. It sounded like the beasts were surrounding our clearing.

I glared at Raltaak. “What the hell did you just do?!”

Raltaak shrugged. “Not much,” he replied. “I simply called on a few low-ranking Mazoku from the astral side to possess some forest creatures.”

Not much?! He’d summoned a small army of demons to kill us, and he considered that “not much”?!

The animal cries turned into demonic roars. Dozens of Mazoku stepped out of the trees; I swallowed and shifted my feet, preparing for one horrific battle.

“Now!” Dugld cried, happily flinging back his cloak. “Let the fun begin!”

The Battle From Hell

The roars of the lesser demons filled the heavy air. More important, though, were the other things that filled the air—namely hundreds of Flare Arrows hailing down on us from all directions.

I grabbed hold of Gourry and dove into the lodge, already chanting a spell as I jumped.

"Wind!" I shouted.

A wind barrier extended from me, covering Gourry, Abel, and Radok.

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

I could hear arrows slamming against the wooden cabin, but between the wind barrier and the cabin's walls, we felt nothing more than a harmless rise in temperature. The cabin's exterior burst into flames as the fire arrows hit dry wood.

"Aaah!" Abel cried out, cringing at the flames.

My wind barrier was decent protection, but I knew it wouldn't be enough once the fire started spreading. We didn't have time to waste.

"Gourry!" I yelled. "Let's go!"

"Right!"

I released the wind barrier and began chanting my next spell. Gourry drew the Sword of Light and leapt out of the lodge.

We'd survived the first Mazoku onslaught, but I knew better than to count on our luck holding. We had to whittle the demons' numbers down as much as possible before they fired their next shot. Their strength lay in their numbers—the more of them we left to hit us with Flare Arrows, the worse off we'd be.

"Dam Brass!" I shouted.

My spell blasted a hole in the rear wall of the lodge. "Abel!" I called, pointing to the hole. "I'm going after the Mazoku! Take your dad and hide in the forest!"

I didn't stick around to find out if Abel took my advice. Chanting another spell, I burst out through the front door.

As expected, Zelgadiss and Amelia were both fine; they'd probably erected their own wind barriers. They ran up to Gourry and prepared to fight the Mazoku horde.

I tried to scan the landscape for any sign of Raltaak or Xelloss, but the sun had already set—I could barely tell my friends from my enemies from the trees surrounding them all. Lucky for me, darkness is one of the easiest problems for a sorceress to solve.

"Lighting!"

I shot my amplified lighting spell skyward. Added to the faint light of the burning cabin, it definitely helped visibility. And it gave me just what I wanted—shadows for everyone. I started to chant an amplification spell.

My plan seemed slightly less brilliant a few seconds later. A large group of the Mazoku, surprised, turned their collective

attention to the defenseless enemy who'd just spurted a giant glowing light.

Fudge.

A barrage of Flare Arrows flew at me. Realizing I couldn't finish my magic in time, I tried to outrun the arrows… but there were too many, coming at me from too many directions, and there was no way I could—

Hssss!

The Flare Arrows suddenly dissolved in the air. I blinked, wondering why I wasn't dead.

"I won't charge you for that," Xelloss' voice called out. "Consider it a one-time special."

Xelloss?!

I still couldn't see him, and at the moment I didn't have the time to look. I made a mental note to thank him for saving my life and then got on with the spell chanting.

"Diskang!" I shouted.

My shadow suddenly transformed into a mass of dragon maws. The sharp-toothed shadowy mouths sprung at the shadows of the Mazoku around me.

Every time my ferocious shadow bit into the demon's shadow, the corresponding part of the demon's body spurted black blood. It was a nasty, disturbing sight—the demons were torn apart by invisible jaws while they writhed around in agony—but at least it

did the trick.

“Ha!” Zelgadiss cried as he thrust his sword. He’d infused his broadsword with magic energy again, so his attack easily ran a lesser demon through. Another Mazoku roared in anger and launched a Flare Arrow.

A single Flare Arrow, fired by a weak demon with the intelligence of a yam, was nothing for a warrior like Zelgadiss to worry about. The demons timing was simplistic and his aim not particularly accurate, so Zelgadiss had little trouble avoiding the arrow and sending its caster a disapproving glare.

Zelgadiss sprinted for the Mazoku who’d attacked him, chanting a spell under his breath. He easily evaded an incoming arrow and raised his sword for the kill… before jerking backward as a pebble of darkness zinged past.

“You’re mine,” Dugld snarled, rushing in for Zelgadiss. But Zelgadiss already had an attack ready to go.

“Elmekia Flame!” he shouted.

Elmekia Flame is pretty much an Elmekia Lance with more punch. Since it inflicts damage from the astral side, nailing a human with it can easily destroy that human s mind—and hitting a Mazoku with it can potentially rip that Mazoku apart.

Of course, it can only do that kind of massive damage if it actually *hits.* When Dugld saw the spell heading toward him, he sidestepped and let it smash into a lesser demon standing behind him.

The lesser demon's body shuddered violently before dropping to the ground with a thud. Dugld regained his footing and charged for Zelgadiss, who stood his ground and prepared to parry the attack.

Dugld suddenly leapt to the side. Behind him were several Flare Arrows—fired moments before by Mazoku hoping to catch Zelgadiss unawares. With Dugld out of the way, nothing stood between Zelgadiss and fiery doom.

Zelgadiss put his good reflexes to use. When he saw Dugld dive to the side, it only took him a moment to follow suit. Still, that moment cost him: a streak of fire grazed his left arm, turning his sleeve to ash.

Dugld shot another darkness pebble, but Zelgadiss deflected it with his broadsword. It was proving to be a pretty one-sided fight.

"It's over!" Dugld growled, holding up his palms. The dark pebbles hovering around his body gathered in his hands, melding together into the shape of a sword.

CLANG!

The air itself shuddered as Dugld's Sword of Darkness clashed against Zelgadiss' magic-infused blade.

The swords bit into each other, depleting the other's energy while they touched.

That was when one of the cheaper lesser demons prepared another Flare Arrow for Zelgadiss.

It was bad—if the Mazoku let loose with his arrow, there was no way Zelgadiss could both dodge it *and* keep Dugld at bay.

Fortunately, just as the lesser demon smiled an evil smile, a blinding streak of white light blew his head to pieces.

Gourry panted nearby, his empty hilt in his hand. He'd fired the blade out of the Sword of Light.

Although Gourry managed to save Zelgadiss from a nasty situation, his action had created an even nastier one for himself. The blade of his Sword took several seconds to reform, leaving him temporarily defenseless against a slew of lesser demons.

Swish! Swish! Swish!

In a spectacular display of unoriginality, the Mazoku horde sent a volley of Flare Arrows at Gourry, who ducked, dodged, and otherwise kept his head down. The new light blade burst from his hilt just in time for him to slice a Flare Arrow out of the air.

* * *

Meanwhile, Amelia had her own crowd of lesser demons to contend with. With her abilities, she was more than a match for all of them, but they weren't all she had to worry about.

"So we meet again," Gduza called with dark humor. "Make no mistake—this time, you are *mine!*"

Amelia, obviously, was familiar with Gduza's fighting style, and particularly knew how to exploit one weakness—Gduza's love of lame villain speeches.

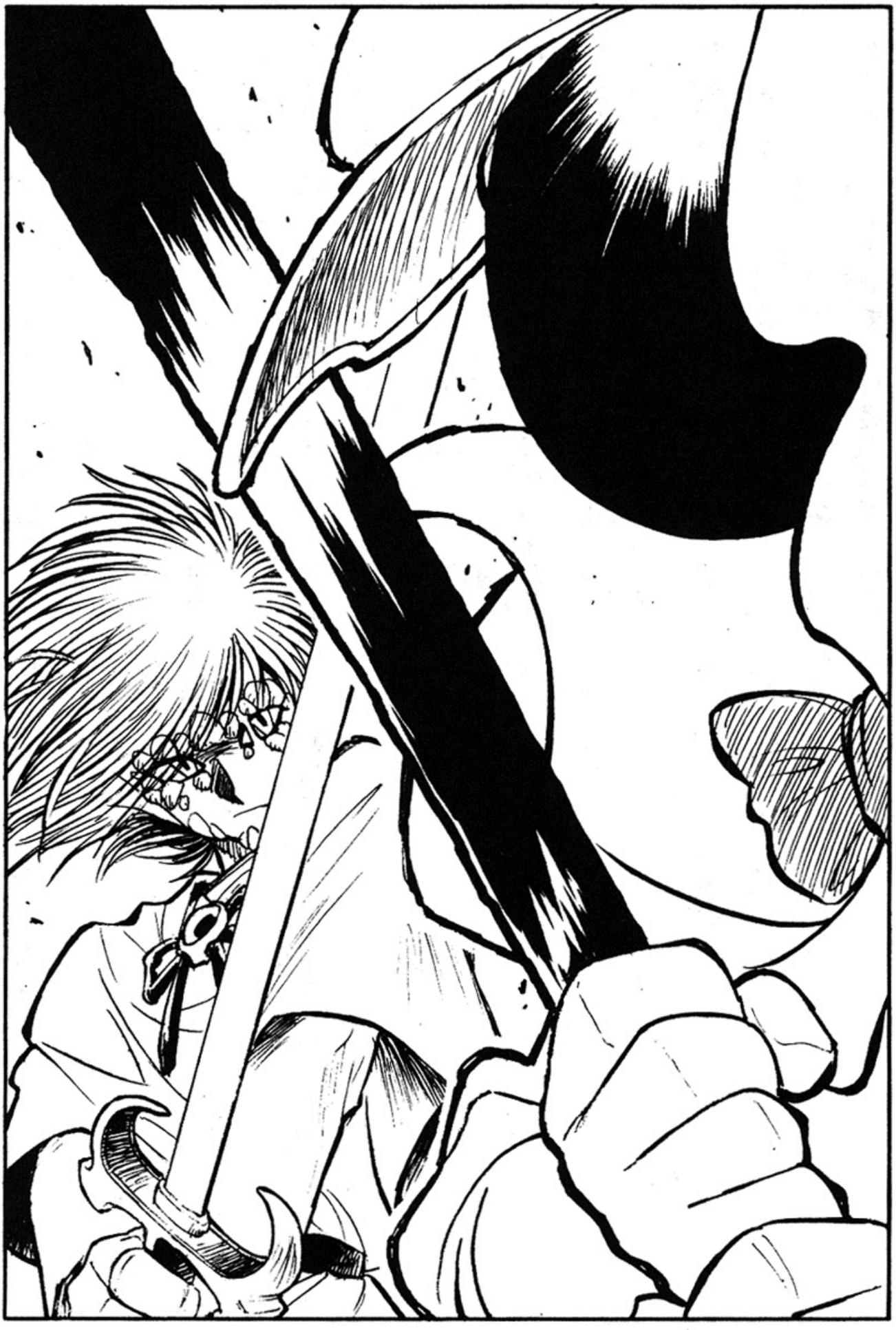
While Gduza cackled maniacally, Amelia was well into her chanting.

The lesser demons surrounding Amelia tried to throw her off with a volley of Flare Arrows, but Amelia dodged them easily. That was the moment I fired my amplified lighting spell into the sky.

The grotesque smile on Gduza's face broadened. She plunged her hair into the shadow that appeared at her feet; like it had at the tavern, the hair emerged out of Amelia's shadow and wrapped tightly around the girl's ankles.

This time, though, Gduza had an army of Mazoku for back-up fire.

"Get her!" Gduza screeched.



The swarm of lesser demons roared and filled the air with dozens of flaming arrows. The arrows burst into fiery explosions and engulfed Amelia where she stood.

When the smoke cleared, Amelia remained decidedly unbarbequed. She was already chanting her next spell.

Gduza growled. “A defensive spell?” she snapped.

White Magic spells for healing and defense are a priestess’ stock in trade. Given the time to chant, a defensive spell strong enough to ward off a few Flare Arrows is a piece of cake for a priestess like Amelia.

Gduza ranted and raved about Amelia’s impending doom, her murderous tendrils of hair slithering up Amelia’s body. But before the Mazoku could get very far, Amelia completed her spell.

“Elmekia Lance!” she shouted, aiming directly at the hair holding her feet.

It was a point-blank shot. The Elmekia Lance blew the locks completely apart, freeing Amelia’s ankles. Gduza shrieked as she hastily pulled her hair out of the shadow.

For a Mazoku, every part of her physical appearance is a part of her “body”—this includes tails and other creative appendages, clothing, accessories, and hair. Some parts of a demon’s body can be detached and discarded by the demon herself, but while those parts are still linked, any damage to them acts as damage to the Mazoku. Destroying a section of Gduza’s hair was equivalent to ripping off one of her fingers in terms of pain and inconvenience.

“You little brat!” Gduza railed in frustration.

Ignoring Gduza’s ongoing commentary, Amelia dashed toward the Mazoku, chanting a spell as she ran.

“You incompetent fools!” Gduza screamed at the surrounding demons. “Why aren’t you attacking?! I want her taken care of, *now!”*

At Gduza’s order, the Mazoku let out another barrage of Flare Arrows. Amelia, though, had another surprise up her sleeve.

“Visfrank!” she shouted.

It was a spell I’d never heard of. She released the Power Word, she leapt out of the way of half the Flare Arrow volley, then landed and turned to face the second half head-on. She thrust out a palm.

WHAM!

The flaming arrows scattered in all directions. Gduza’s jaw—if it could be considered a jaw—dropped.

Not unlike Zelgadiss’ Astral Vine and broadsword, Amelia’s mystery spell had infused her bare hands with concentrated magical power. She rushed for Gduza without batting an eye.

Gduza shrieked in frustration. *“A* mere human will never destroy me!” she screamed as her hair billowed and surged. A strange sound filled the air—one that seemed, weirdly, to come from the hair itself. It was a low buzz, like the drone of a gigantic insect’s wings.

Suddenly—

VOOM!

A shockwave of magic energy pulsed from the hair, rushing straight for the charging Amelia.

* * *

Four now-dead lesser demons fell to the ground in a heap, their minds and bodies destroyed by my shadow dragons. My own shadow quickly returned to its normal, non- freaky shape.

Four down, more than I can count to go.

I'd managed to thin out the herd a little, but I still hadn't done anything to decisively turn the battle around. Despite my having just horribly mangled their companions, several of the lesser demons decided to come at me all at once.

I knew that if I stuck around while the Mazoku attacked me, my only options would be wasting time and energy on another defensive spell or trusting the demons' lack of strategy and my own dodging skills. I decided that a tactical retreat was a better idea.

I ran for the woods, hoping to hide out in the trees. If the Mazoku couldn't see me, they couldn't hit me with Flare Arrows. And then I remembered that trees are flammable. And that anybody who missed me would be hitting trees.

I decided to rethink my strategy so it wouldn't involve dying in a massive forest fire.

Ironically, my next-best escape option was to run back into the burning cabin—not an ideal place for hiding, but I needed cover and I needed it fast. I changed directions, dodging a Flare Arrow before dashing into the inferno.

The first thing that hit me when I ran inside was a painful burst of hot air. Every surface of the wooden cabin danced with flames. Radok and Abel had fled at some point, probably through the complimentary hole I'd blasted for them in the back wall—proving, at least, that I didn't have to hold their hands through *everything*.

Without me to shoot at anymore, the Mazoku outside sent their flaming arrows into the cabin's side. The already- weakened walls shook with the force and started to crumble; holding my breath, I dove through the hole just as the burning cabin walls finally collapsed in a massive pillar of flame.

I spun around on my heels. Since looking for cover wasn't really working, I decided to do what I do best; I charged the nearest group of enemies while chanting a spell.

"Blast Ash!" I shouted.

FOOM!

Two Mazoku immediately disintegrated into piles of black dust.

That's six!

From the looks of things, my party and I had defeated somewhere around a dozen Mazoku… which *might've* been impressive if there hadn't been a good twenty more demons to go. The most frustrating thing was that I knew I could end everything with one good Dragon Slave—the spell could destroy the rest of the lesser demons and leave an impressive crater in the side of the mountain. The downside was that casting a Dragon

Slave would probably kill all my friends, so I was snick picking

Mazoku off a few at a time with my weaker, less cool spells.

I started chanting for my next attack. Before I could finish, a presence suddenly ran up from behind me.

Crap! I turned around to face the wall of trees, my spell on the tip of my tongue.

But it was Abel. He panted and stared at me, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Hey!" I shouted. "You're not supposed to be here!"

Abel didn't respond; he just grabbed my hand and pulled me through the forest underbrush. Judging from his anxious behavior, something bad had happened.

"What's going on?!" I demanded, tripping to keep up. "What happened to your dad?! And I can't run when you drag me!"

Abel finally stopped his mad rush, doubling over as he tried to catch his breath. He rubbed a fist into his eye.

"After w-we left the burning house," he panted, "Father told me to get away from the arrows. He pushed me into the forest and told me to run." He looked up at me, panic in his expression. "I never saw him after that. I looked everywhere, but he… but…"

My client's gone missing, now of all times? Somebody shoot me!

"Your father's fine," I told him with no idea whatsoever. "Once we finish this little skirmish, we can put all our energy into finding him. But for now, you have to get out of here." I gave him a little

push away from the fighting, hoping he'd get the idea.

Without looking back, I ran onto the battlefield. I was scanning for a target for my next spell when I spied a lesser demon crouched behind me.

"Dynast Breath!" I shouted.

The Mazoku struck by my spell froze, then shattered. I wiped my damp forehead on my sleeve before heading back into the fray.

* * *

Dugld and Zelgadiss each pushed into their locked blades. Zel ground his teeth and dug his heels into the dirt.

Dugld's sword had gone from jet-black to gray over the course of the battle, since the blade lost power with each attack. Dugld's Sword of Darkness didn't have nearly the power of Gourry's Sword of Light or my Ragna Blade— each time it clashed against Zelgadiss' magic-infused broadsword, it lost more of its energy. Unfortunately, Zelgadiss' Astral Vine sword weakened at almost the same rate; it was clear that the one who won the fight would be the one whose sword held out the longest.

Unless Dugld changed the rules.

"End of the line, rocky!" Dugld spat. Ten more pebbles of darkness materialized around him, hovering in the air and ready to attack. Zelgadiss had no chance of dodging; everything he had was focused on the sword-lock.

"Aaarrggh!"

A loud and startling cry split the air. Surprisingly, it didn't come from Zelgadiss—it came from Dugld. Dugld's sword scraped free of the lock as the Mazoku staggered back.

Zel's magic-infused dagger—probably prepared before the sword fight—was buried hilt-deep in the demon's torso. Dugld shrieked in pain as he frantically grabbed the dagger and yanked it out of his body.

Zelgadiss didn't waste the opportunity. Slicing through a few lesser demons who ran into his path, he deliberately advanced on the retreating Dugld.

"Y-you can't do this!" Dugld cried. "No weakling chimera can beat the likes of me!"

Zelgadiss laughed darkly. "That's what you get for all the chimera cracks."

"You disgusting little—!" Dugld took another step back. "This time I *will* kill you!"

"I've heard that one before. No one's actually managed it yet."

His quips finally over with, Zelgadiss began chanting a spell. Dugld jerked his head around before focusing on a nearby lesser demon.

"Ha!" Dugld ran toward it. "Close, but I'm not through yet!"

Dugld abruptly thrust his hand through the lesser demon's chest. From the look of it, the lesser demon was as startled as Zelgadiss; the Mazoku shrieked as his body convulsed in its death throes.

Dugld laughed crazily as he clenched his fist in the lesser demon's chest, causing black blood to spurt into the air. "Yes," he drawled. "Yes, *yes!* Fear is so delicious!"

As for *why* Dugld felt the need to do something so disgusting: the negative emotions produced by living things are the source of demonic power. To recover from the damage inflicted by Zelgadiss, Dugld sacrificed a lesser demon and fed on its fear and despair. It was pretty much cannibalism without the use of a mouth.

Dugld pulled back his bloody hand and turned to Zelgadiss. "Now," the Mazoku declared as a new set of dark pebbles formed around him. "I admit I was careless before, but this time 111—"

Dugld froze. Zelgadiss had been chanting his spell the entire time, but it was only just then that Dugld realized what it was.

"R-Ra Tilt?!" he exclaimed. He obviously knew what kinds of nasty things would happen to him if he got hit with that one.

Snarling, Dugld sank into the ground and left his pebbles behind. Like Gduza had done earlier, Dugld left an astral fragment as a decoy and moved his main body to safety.

Obviously pissed, Zelgadiss quickly scanned the area for a new target. Once a spell's been chanted, a sorcerer can only hold it for a short period of time before it has to be cast—and Dugld wouldn't be back until the coast was clear.

Grunting with frustration, Zelgadiss released the Ra Tilt on a lesser demon nearby. It was some pretty serious overkill, but it was better than wasting a perfectly good spell.

“Ha!” Displaying infuriatingly timing, Dugld leapt out of the woods and back into the fray. He clicked his tongue with mock disappointment.

“And what was the point of that?” Dugld asked as a full set of darkness pebbles orbited his body. “You’re not very efficient, monster boy.”

Zelgadiss gritted his teeth and took a few steps back. He wasn’t in great shape—he’d just cast a spell, and he’d already used up most of the power in his magic-infused broadsword. He quickly began chanting a new spell under his breath.

“Yeah, right!” Dugld laughed. He shot his pebbles straight at Zelgadiss.

* * *

The wave of magical energy surged for Amelia, knocking aside everything in its path. Amelia spread her feet and raised her magic-infused palm.

WHAM!

The two forces violently collided. The wind whirled and howled, whipping Amelia’s hair around her face.

When the wind finally died down, Amelia dropped her arm. “Ugh,” she groaned.

Deflecting the powerful wave had obviously taken its toll on Amelia: she panted a bit and she wobbled on her feet, staggering back a few paces in the hopes of regrouping.

“Stop her!” Gduza cried as she charged for Amelia.

In response to her command, a number of lesser demons fired a salvo of Flare Arrows. The arrows fell in a wide arc behind Amelia, blocking off any immediate escape route.

Amelia swallowed. Staving off Gduza’s shockwave had depleted almost all of the magic in her palm, so she didn’t stand much of a chance blocking anything. An instant before Gduza reached her, Amelia leapt out of the Mazoku’s charge.

Gduza, not surprisingly, anticipated her move; the moment Amelia jumped, Gduza’s evil hair lashed out in the same direction and grabbed hold of the girl’s feet.

“You can’t cast spells without a windpipe!” the Mazoku cackled. With her hideous mouth twisting into a wicked smile, a lock of her hair wrapped around Amelia’s throat.

Just before Gduza could tighten her hair’s grip, Amelia darted a glance to the side. The startled look in her eyes prompted Gduza to look in the same direction.

That was when Zelgadiss finished chanting his targetless Ra Tilt.

Gduza gasped. Detecting the spell that Zelgadiss was on the brink of unleashing, she froze in hesitation.

It was all Amelia needed. While Gduza watched a lesser demon go up in blue flame, Amelia choked out the last bit of her spell.

“Visfrank!” she shouted.

Gduza’s head whipped back in alarm.

THUD!

Amelia slammed her magic-infused fist into the Mazoku's abdomen.

"Hggck!" Gduza choked. Obviously hurting, she snarled at Amelia.

"You'll pay for that, you little brat!" she snapped. She tightened the hair wound around Amelia's neck.

Amelia gasped for air, flailing her Visfranked fist wildly at Gduza. She lashed out with her right leg; the kick didn't bother the demon, but something crunched in Amelia's knee.

Gduza tilted her head back and let out a loud, long, extremely evil laugh, relishing in the painful destruction of an enemy who couldn't fight back. Amelia took the chance to slam her magical fist into Gduza's grinning face.

"Ack!" Gduza gasped, staggering back as she released her grip on Amelia. Amelia had obviously hit the sweet spot.

Amelia hit the ground hard, gasping as air finally rushed into her lungs. After a few deep breaths, she tried to stand, but her broken knee buckled under her. She winced and crumpled back onto the ground.

A lesser demon nearby saw her display of weakness and decided that a wounded, immobile opponent was something he could possibly handle.

SLICE!

The lesser demon's body split in half, bisected at the waist by a white light. His top half fell forward to reveal Gourry standing behind him.

A few seconds later, I ran up to join him.

"Gaav Flare!" I yelled.

A bright red beam shot from my hands, slicing through a Mazoku and impaling the one behind him. Demons eight and nine on the "killed nastily by Lina" list fell to the ground.

We'd made a significant dent in the number of lesser demons still standing, which also decreased our chances of getting set on fire from behind. Gourry took advantage of the relative peace to really dig into the Mazoku who remained.

Gourry, as I've mentioned before, is an extremely talented swordsman, and he definitely won the kill prize that day. He'd even managed to help the rest of us, in- between mowing down the enemy ranks.

But I was still worried. Even with Gourry finishing off the lesser demons, Zelgadiss and Amelia hadn't finished their respective fights. And that was all *besides* the fact that we hadn't seen—

A sudden, sinking feeling in my stomach cut off my thoughts. I spun around to face the forest; I have a policy of investigating my hunches.

Something was there. I heard a faint rustling noise, then saw some bushes move… my heart nearly stopped as a familiar silhouette appeared.

“Zuuma?!” I gasped.

Of course he shows up when I don’t have any backup!

I was freaked—big-time. Why oh why couldn’t I just face another one thousand lesser demons?!

Zuuma wasted no time in charging straight for me. I stumbled back a step, frantically trying to finish a spell before he reached me.

“Fireball!” I shouted.

Zuuma easily dodged the spell as he ran. I was prepared for that, though—I pointed at the ball of fire the moment it soared past him.

“Break!” I cried.

BOOM!

The fireball exploded, sending flames in all directions. Zuuma disappeared in the expanding fire.

I knew Zuuma wasn’t about to get killed by a simple fireball. I’d tried hitting him with one back in our forest fight, and it had failed pretty miserably—Zuuma clearly had some high level defensive spells tucked away. I only hoped to slow him down a little.

I quickly started chanting my next spell. After a momentary pause, Zuuma burst out of the flames.

So much for buying time.

He was advancing too quickly—I couldn’t finish! I staggered back a little and hurled my knife at him, hoping the action would slow him down a little. Because chucking weapons at the guy had

worked *so* well in the past.

Instead of ducking or dodging the knife, Zuuma actually caught it. In one smooth motion, he snatched the knife out of the air and launched it back at me—directly at my head!

I lurched backward in panic. The dagger tore through the air right over my head, literally missing me by a few hairs.

I tried to regain my footing, but my last-second dodge had left me way off balance. The next thing I knew, I was landing on my butt as Zuuma closed in.

Crap crap crap crap crap!

I was defenseless while I chanted my spell, and I still needed more *time.* The only thing I could think of doing was kicking him in the crotch or something. I knew he might break my leg, but it was better than getting killed.

I braced myself and slid back a leg.

Zuuma suddenly ground to a halt. He narrowed his eyes, his pupils reflecting a blazing white light that came from directly behind me.

The Sword of Light.

"It's been awhile," Gourry called, holding his sword low as he stepped around me.

Zuuma didn't respond. I took the chance to scramble to my feet.

"Lina." Gourry glanced at me. "Go take care of the other demons. I can hold this guy off for now."

I hesitated for a second. I didn't like the idea of leaving Zuuma with Gourry; it wasn't that I couldn't *take* Zuuma, it was just that I… couldn't take Zuuma.

But I also knew that being stubborn would just make it harder for Gourry to kick Zuuma's ass. "Got it," I muttered as I headed off to explode some Mazoku.

At least it looked like Gourry was in pretty good shape. Zuuma's blade-snapping trick was useless against a sword he couldn't grab, and his high-powered spells were worthless if Gourry didn't give him a chance to cast anything.

Gourry charged. The assassin jumped backward, giving himself some breathing room.

"Flare Arrow!" Zuuma shouted.

About twenty flaming arrows materialized before the assassin and launched themselves at Gourry.

"Doesn't anybody know a *different* spell?" Gourry complained. He dodged and parried the arrows, mostly keeping on his beeline for Zuuma.

The spell cleared a path for Zuuma; he sprinted right behind the Flare Arrows and met Gourry head-on. Gourry tried a vertical strike from above.

WHAM!

Zuuma blocked the attack with the palm of his left hand. Taking a page from Amelia's book, Zuuma had collected magic energy in his hands.

It was… unexpected, I guess you could say. When had he learned *that* spell?

While Zuuma blocked the Sword of Light with his left hand, he thrust his right at Gourry's stomach. Gourry jerked his body back, letting Zuuma's palm hit air.

Both Gourry and Zuuma retreated a few steps. His eyes never leaving Zuuma's, Gourry calmly regripped his sword.

* * *

The pebbles of darkness zoomed through the air with a high-pitched whine. Zelgadiss dove to the side, using a lesser demon's corpse as cover.

Thwock, thwock, thwok!

The pebbles lodged themselves in the dead body.

"Trying to hide?" Dugld asked as he quickly advanced on his opponent. He leapt over Zelgadiss' corpse shield, but never got a chance to attack.

Something silver sliced through the air.

"Gggh!" Dugld gurgled as he stumbled back. He lost his balance and fell to the ground, all while clutching at the new dagger in his chest. "N-not again!"

Zelgadiss stood, his broadsword glowing crimson in his hand. He'd managed to reinforce his blade with magic while evading Dugld's pebbles.

Dugld shakily pulled out the dagger as he stumbled to his feet.

With a clean sweep of his broadsword, Zelgadiss cut deep into Dugld's torso.

The Mazoku's scream filled the air. He staggered away a few steps, but Zelgadiss calmly followed.

"You're an idiot," Zelgadiss said darkly. "Did you really think I only enchanted one dagger? I've got *tons* of enchanted daggers. Do you think you want another one?"

Dugld choked something incoherent. The light of sweet payback flared up in Zelgadiss' eyes.

"You've got a big mouth," Zelgadiss murmured, "and I don't appreciate your commentary. Your attacks were predictable and stupid. Oh, and that's the worst hat I've ever seen."

After being wounded so severely, Dugld could do little more than try to pull himself together. Almost all of the lesser demons had been killed, so he couldn't pull his recovery trick again.

"I-I'll kill you!" Dugld snarled lamely as he prepared for the next attack.

* * *

Amelia struggled to her feet as she chanted her next spell. Gduza groaned and used her evil hair to tenderly stroke her face.

Both opponents were in bad shape—they had to end things, and fast. Amelia took a breath and charged as best she could on her injured knee. Gduza stood her ground and prepared to defend with her hair.

“Visfrank!” Amelia shouted. Her hands flared up with magic.

Gduza whipped her hair out, and two long ropes wrapped around Amelia’s hands. The first locks to touch the magic-infused palms fizzled and died, but the Mazoku wrapped the hands over and over and quickly depleted the energy from Amelia’s spell.

Gduza screamed in agony as layers of her hair burned. She overpowered Amelia’s arms and sent more hair to wrap around the girl’s torso.

Amelia choked as the hair cocooned her. She struggled to gasp out her next spell.

Gduza laughed crazily. “There!” she cried. “Try and get your magic energy through *that,* you insolent human!”

Amelia struggled weakly. Gduza’s lips curled maniacally as her hair began to buzz. But then, suddenly, the power building in the hair stopped. Gduza’s mouth opened in a silent scream.

Dugld stood behind her, a hand shoved inside her body to the wrist.

“Du-Dugld!” she gasped. Her long coils of black hair fell from Amelia, dissolving into delicate particles as their power faded.

Amelia fell heavily to the ground. Fighting to stay conscious, she began chanting a new spell.

“I’ll kill that chimera bastard!” Dugld raged, his hand still stuck through his comrade’s torso. “I need whatever strength you have left, Gduza!”

From the crazed tone of Dugld's voice, the fight with Zelgadiss had destroyed what little sanity the demon had ever had.

Gduza gurgled out some sort of incoherent curse. Her body crumbled to black ash and scattered in the wind.

Dugld snarled in frustration. "No!" he yelled. "I need more!" He desperately looked around for another lesser demon, but we'd already killed the ones nearby.

Amelia took her chance. "Elmekia Lance!" she cried.

Dugld, apparently, hadn't noticed Amelia in his frenzy to eat his teammates. He shrieked in pain as the unexpected spell hit him dead on.

"N-no!" was all the Mazoku could sputter as he struggled to turn to her. Unfortunately for him, that left his back open to Zelgadiss.

SLICE!

Zel's sword cut right down the middle of Dugld's back, slicing the demon wide open. Dugld couldn't even scream as his body crumbled into black powder.

The wind picked up whatever was left of Dugld, scattering the once-Mazoku through the air. Amelia let out a relieved sigh.

"Finally," she breathed. "I can't believe it's over." Zelgadiss shrugged. "Over for *them,* anyway."

Amelia giggled weakly at his words.

* * *

Zuuma shifted his feet. Gourry clenched his jaw.

Zuuma broke the tension by jumping high into the air. Gourry countered by swinging the Sword of Light's blade at him; Zuuma easily deflected the flying blade with the magic in his palm. The assassin then spawned a mass of magic in his hand and hurled it at Gourry.

The Sword of Light's blade re-formed in the nick of time. Gourry swung at the magic mass and shattered it before it could hit.

"Dark Mist," Zuuma intoned.

When had he gotten the chance to chant that?! Gourry vanished inside the stifling blackness, but he knew better than to stay put. He bolted out of the mist, his sword drawn and prepared for an attack.

But Zuuma had moved—he'd used Gourry's brief loss of vision to shift to the swordsman's side. Zuuma sent a shockwave of power hurtling toward the unsuspecting Gourry.

Maybe it was because he sensed a vibration in the air or maybe it was just instinct, but Gourry abruptly swung the Sword of Light in the shockwave's direction. The blazing weapon bisected Zuuma's magic, saving Gourry from serious injury.

Zuuma charged again. Gourry readied his sword in anticipation, but Zuuma changed tactics just before entering sword range; with a sweeping motion of one hand, he released another shockwave.

"What?" Gourry blurted. The magic was too close for a dodge, so Gourry was forced to parry. He swung his Sword of Light and deflected the wave just in time.

Seizing the moment, Zuuma pounced.

It seemed like Zuuma wanted to get in close—he could grasp Gourry's sword with one hand and blast magic at Gourry with the other. Not wanting to give him the opportunity, Gourry fired his blade point-blank since there was no way he could miss.

He missed.

Possibly because he'd anticipated the maneuver, Zuuma twisted his body and avoided the flying blade by a hair. Gourry dropped back on his hands and kicked out hard.

Gourry's foot rammed into Zuuma's abdomen. The assassin went hurtling backward and barely managed to land on his feet.

"Flare Arrow!" Zelgadiss shouted.

The surprise magic attack sent a shower of arrows screaming through the air. But right before they could hit, Zuuma waved a hand and sent the arrows scattering.

Zelgadiss' eyes widened. "No way that just happened," he breathed.

"Do not interfere." Zuuma sent a shockwave at Zelgadiss, just in case Zel hadn't gotten the point.

BOOM!

The wave hit Zelgadiss full force.

I'd just killed the last of the lesser demons when I saw Zelgadiss go flying. Cursing our luck, I turned to Amelia.

"Amelia!" I shouted across the battlefield. "Go heal Zel!"

I saw Amelia limp toward our fallen friend. With the two of them out of the line of fire for the moment, I switched my attention over to Gourry and his predicament.

Something was… weird about Zuuma's attack pattern. It struck me as familiar in some way, but at the same time it didn't match with how he'd fought in earlier battles.

Whatever Zuuma's strategy, he'd be toast if I could just catch him by surprise. The moment he and Gourry broke apart, I fired off a spell.

"Zelas Brid!" I shouted.

It was another one of my recently developed spells—one of the ones that needed an amplification. Zelas Brid is as powerful as a Dynast Brass or Ragna Blast*and* works against demons, but it can only affect a single opponent at a time. Still, its best feature is that the caster can control it remotely, theoretically making it impossible to dodge.

Impossible for humans, *anyway.*

As soon as I shouted the Power Words, a ribbon of light emerged from my index finger and shot toward Zuuma. Zuuma shifted himself away with ridiculous speed; the light responded to my commands and instantly changed course to follow him.

Zuuma chanted a spell under his breath. Now that I had the chance to study him more closely, I noticed something—the voice he used to utter the spell had a familiar cadence that *definitely* wasn't

his.

If that meant what I thought it meant, we were all screwed.

Zuuma stopped moving to complete his own spell. I took advantage of his pause and swung the Zelas Brid at him.

SKKSSH!

Zuuma blocked the spell. He *blocked* it. And instead of dying a horrible death like a normal human assassin, he made my ribbon of light shatter into a million harmless shards.

My blood ran cold.

"Zuuma," I called. I swallowed hard, trying not to panic. "You… you merged with Seigram, didn't you?"

Zuuma's evil eyes locked on me. "You noticed," he replied in a voice that wasn't his.

That was Seigram, all right. The faceless Mazoku himself spoke from behind the assassin's mask and shroud.

"Our battle in Atlas City left me grievously wounded," Seigram's voice told us darkly. "I lost a great deal of my power. The man whose body I now share lost both his arms in a similar fight.

"Such indignation," Seigram snarled. "Such indignation to suffer at the hands of two ridiculous fools!"

I finally understood why Seigram the Formless had worn that mask during our fight at the tavern, and why breaking that mask and the dark warding field had been the only things to make him retreat.

Zuuma had been hiding behind that mask in the darkness.

It also explained a lot of the things that had confused me up until then—why Zuuma's abilities had seemed so impossible, and why Seigram's fighting technique had changed. Both of our enemies had been wrapped up in one ugly, evil package.

"I told you I would repay you," Seigram's voice growled. "After our fateful encounter, I swore that one day I would return to repay you. But since the wounds from the Sword of Light aren't so easily healed, I sacrificed my original demonic form and merged with this assassin instead."

He actually gave up his demonic form just to get revenge on Gourry and me?

I didn't know whether or not to be flattered or horrified.

“So,” I offered, “you cooked up a deal with Raltaak, got a couple of your old demon buddies together, then challenged us to a fight.”

Zuuma-Seigram nodded calmly.

“But what was in it for Raltaak?”

“There’s no need to go into detail with one who’s doomed to die,” the human-Mazoku hybrid replied, assuming Zuuma’s voice this time.

I scowled. “We’ll see about that, jackass. Neither of you has a great track record with making us die.” Zuuma-Seigram abruptly sprinted for Gourry, who rushed forward to meet him.

It didn’t surprise me that our enemy decided to attack Gourry right off. No matter how powerful an evil entity, Zuuma—or Seigram or whatever—couldn’t afford to ignore anyone armed with the Sword of Light. The evil bastard could take care of me once Gourry was eliminated.

But Zuuma-Seigram didn’t need time to cast normal spells, a skill that made him especially deadly at close range. I knew that if Gourry was reckless, the whole thing could end in disaster.

I quickly began chanting my own spell.

The demon assassin fired a magical shockwave at Gourry, but Gourry easily deflected it with his sword. Zuuma-Seigram leapt high into the air directly over Gourry and tried launching another wave from there.

“Yikes,” Gourry muttered. He angled the Sword of Light upward; as one might expect, the angle of deflection was incredibly

hard to determine, so it took all of Gourry's attention for a moment. His opponent plummeted toward him with a magic-infused palm.

"Elmekia Lance!" I shouted.

I released the spell, watching with satisfaction as it hit Zuuma-Seigram squarely in the chest. But it didn't even knock him off his dive—he still slammed his magic hand right into the Sword of Light!

Using the point of collision as a fulcrum, Zuuma- Seigram swung his body down with both of his feet extended. Gourry barely managed to lurch backward and avoid the brunt of a severe two-footed kick.

With a sharp metallic snap, Gourry's breastplate broke in half. It seemed like Zuuma-Seigram had used claws of some sort.

"Dammit!" Gourry yelled.

The broken breastplate hindered Gourry's mobility for a second. Unfortunately, a second was all the demonic hybrid needed.

Zuuma-Seigram fired off another magic shockwave at point-blank range. Gourry had no chance to stop it; it knocked him off his feet and threw him toward the forest. He landed heavily in a bush full of thorns.

"Gourry!" I cried.

I was relieved to hear movement from the bush, followed by a groan. But from where I stood I couldn't tell how badly he'd been hurt.

Meanwhile, "Zuugram" looked awfully unsteady on his feet.

Apparently my Elmekia Lance had done a number on him. I was glad to see we'd finally done some decent damage to the guy.

"Let's… settle this," he growled as he moved his hard eyes to me. I couldn't tell if the voice I heard was Zuuma's or Seigram's.

"Stop it!"

I blinked. The voice came from the woods, and it was painfully familiar.

Good God, I thought. *Tell me that's not…*

Abel—yes, Abel "No Survival Instincts" Ranzaad— ran out of the woods, breathless and flustered. "Stop it!" he cried. "Please, that's enough!"

The demon assassin's gaze shifted to him.

We really don't need untrained wimps on the battlefield right now, moron!

"Hasn't this gone far enough?!" Abel yelled desperately. "Why do you have to kill?!"

Zuuma-Seigram didn't reply.

"Answer me, Father!"

Wait a second—"father"?!

Was *everyone* we knew secretly Zuuma?!

The hybrid of pretty much every enemy we'd had for the past week glared at Abel.

"How… did you know?" he rasped. Now the voice belonged to

neither Zuuma nor Seigram, but to our supposedly weak employer.

Yeah, I've just about had it.

Abel stepped toward his evil father. "I'm… I'm your *son,"* he murmured, tears forming in the corners of his eyes. "Isn't that so, Father?"

So Radok had been Zuuma all along, and had been Seigram since after Saillune, and had been a jerk his whole life. No wonder we'd been confused.

I'd *thought* taking a hostage had seemed like an un- Zuuma-like thing to do. He hadn't actually done it—he'd kidnapped *himself* in order to lure us out into the middle of nowhere. That was definitely more in character.

So all the grief Radok had given us since day one had actually been because he hated us? Unless it had been his way of hiding his more murderous feelings. Zuuma had to use his Radok persona to get us to Vezendi, which meant he'd written that fake note and everything, too. So both Radok *and* Zuuma were guilty of the crack about my chest!

It also meant that every comment, complaint, and whine from Abel had been an attempt to help us. He'd tried to *save* us by driving us away.

Talk about a mind trip!

"Abel," Radok's voice threatened quietly, "say your prayers."

Abel stared at his father in shock.

“Pray that Lina Inverse is victorious today,” Radok- Zuuma-Seigram continued. “Because if I win this battle, I cannot let you live.”

“Wait,” I called. “Radok, what’s wrong with you? You have a cushy job as a merchant, not to mention a boatload of cash. Why do you need to go around assassinating people on the side?”

Radok shook his head. “I do not know why,” he replied lowly. “I only know that I am a man born to kill, and I could live no other way.”

So, he kills people because he’s crazy. I guess that makes some kind of sense.

A violent shudder shook Radok’s body, and when it ended, his stance and bearing seemed different. Sure enough, the next time he spoke it was with Zuuma’s voice.

“This ends here,” he snarled.

I had no time for witty retorts, since I was already chanting a spell.

I knew by then that normal spells wouldn’t work on the guy. Even when I hit him with spells that could inflict damage on Mazoku, his human sorcery skills combined with his demonic capacity enabled him to block. I couldn’t even assume that hitting him with Dragon Slave would do the trick; I’d fought a human-demon hybrid before, and Dragon Slave had been a waste of time.

That left me with only one option: taking him down in close combat, and before he recovered from the Elmekia Lance.

That's way, way easier said than done, Lina.

But whether or not my plan was going to get me killed or not, I was more than a little sick of sitting out of the big fights. My friends had all had dramatic battles that day—where was mine? And since when does Lina Inverse say no to a giant, climatic, explosion-filled final fight?

It was time to kick some ass. Taking a breath, I sprinted toward Gourry.

Combo-Villain cut me off before I could get there. "You want the Sword of Light?" he called, moving way faster than an injured enemy should be able to. "I'll never allow it!"

I do love it when they fall for my bluff.

Once he was in sword range, I completed my spell. "Ragna Blade!" I yelled.

A blazing blade of darkness formed in my open hand. From what I knew of demons, half demons, and Zuuma, the Ragna Blade was exactly what I needed to take the bastard down. I was also pretty sure that neither Zuuma nor Seigram had ever seen it before, so they wouldn't know what to expect.

"What?!" Zuuma-Seigram roared at the sight of my blade of darkness. It only took him a moment to form masses of magic energy in each of his hands. It looked like he wanted to engage my blade of darkness with his left hand and attack me with his right—the exact same attack pattern he'd used on Gourry.

I knew that if Zuuma managed to occupy my blade and blast me

with a free hand, my chances of dodging were slim to none. I struck fast and hard before he had the chance.

"Noooooooo!"

The cry ripped through the air as my enemy staggered backward into the brush, leaving behind one very important thing: his left hand.

I blinked. *Oh,* I thought. *Uh, that'll do.*

To be perfectly honest, I hadn't quite realized how powerful the Ragna Blade could be. It had sliced easily through Zuuma-Seigram's wrist—was my blade actually stronger than the Sword of Light?

But it wasn't the time for introspection. As I stood there being impressed with myself, my enemy launched himself toward Gourry.

Dammit! I couldn't let him get anywhere near Gourry or the sword! I bolted after Zuuma et al, but it didn't matter how fast I ran —I was already too far behind.

There was no way that Gourry—newly on his feet and just barely keeping steady—could've avoided Zuuma- Seigram's kick. Gourry crashed back into the thorn bush, groaning in pain. The demon assassin reached for the Sword of Light.

He gets that, and I'm really screwed.

He had his back to me for the moment. I sprinted up behind him and slashed with all my might!

Zuuma-Seigram's shriek echoed through the trees.

Unfortunately for me, it wasn't a shriek of someone dying

horribly—it was a shriek of surprise, made by someone who had managed to block my attack at the last possible second. Clutched in my opponent's remaining hand, locked with my own Ragna Blade, was the Sword of Light.

Panting, I pushed off Zuuma and Friends and staggered back a step. Ragna Blade is a powerful spell, but it also depletes the caster's energy at an extremely fast rate. I couldn't let things drag on much longer.

"This is it, guys," I called. "Ready to end this? One blow, winner doesn't die?"

"Come," Zuuma's voice hissed.

I charged at him, the blade of darkness held high in my hands.

The demon-assassin-merchant held out the Sword of Light, bracing for my attack.

SLICE!

My blade of darkness tore through Zuuma-Seigram's torso in one clean swipe. He stood stock-still for a moment, his eyes wide and blank, before crumpling to the ground.

"FATHER!" Abel ran over, dropping to his knees where Zuuma —no, Radok Ranzaad—had fallen. "Father!" Abel sobbed. "Father!"

Radok's body twitched. His breath was labored and shallow, and his eyes had closed at some point. Abel curled up beside his father and cried openly

The blade of darkness dissipated in my hands. I stood there,

panting, and watched Abel sob.

Radok's eyes fluttered open.

"Father!" Abel cried.

Faintly, Seigram's voice croaked from Radok's mouth. "You would do well to mock me… Lina Inverse," he rasped. "I merged with a human… to defeat you, but it was because of that human's soul that I was defeated."

Seigram's voice was growing dim. I leaned in closer to hear his words.

"I hesitated at the last moment," he gasped. "Or, should I say, Radok Ranzaad hesitated."

A strange moment from our final blow suddenly came back to me. As I'd sliced down with the Ragna Blade, my opponent had glanced away… he hadn't been looking at me at all.

He'd been looking at his son.

But what did that mean? Had Radok had a last- minute change of heart, or had he lost his nerve when it had mattered most? Unfortunately, I knew we'd never find out.

"Mock… me," Seigram wheezed, and then his body went limp. He didn't move again.

Abel stared at the corpse of his father for a long moment. When he finally rose to his feet, he looked like he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words; he just stood there for a while, his lips slightly apart.

He eventually turned to Gourry and me and gave a long, low bow. Maybe it was his way of thanking us for putting his father out of his misery.

* * *

"It started happening a while ago, you know."

I looked up from the cityscape of Vezendi sprawled out below us. Abel, by my side, looked hesitant for the first time since we'd left his father's body. He'd been too busy commenting passionately on our route and the surrounding mountains and the best way to camp during our return trip.

He'd inherited his father's lust for travel, apparently. "What started happening?" I asked.

He paused, rubbing the back of his neck uncomfortably. "My growing apart from my father," he murmured. "I suspected something was wrong, and our weakening relationship reflected that." He sighed. "That must have been when he started his… well, side profession."

"As Zuuma?" Gourry offered.

Abel gave Gourry a skeptical stare.

What? I wanted to say. *You're not used to Gourry yet?* "Anyway," Abel continued after a moment. "Not long ago, Father returned from a trip with Mister Raltaak, claiming the man was his traveling companion. I suspected something was wrong right away. But then the letter asking for you appeared, and this whole mess began…" He shook his head. "I just never had the time to confront

Father about it."

Zelgadiss crossed his arms, looking silently down at the city below us. "Do you know why your father did what he did?"

Abel sighed. "No," he admitted. "And now I never will, I'm afraid."

We all went quiet for a minute. After taking a deep breath, Abel adjusted the pack on his back and glanced back at me.

"Thank you for escorting me back to Vezendi. I'll be fine from here."

I nodded. Abel began making his way down the hill, his outline quickly shrinking as he left us behind. I watched him until I couldn't distinguish him in the small crowds of people near the city's entrance.

"Lina?" Gourry asked at last. "Why'd you turn down the money? He said he'd pay us for all this, and, well…" He frowned. "It's not like this was an easy gig."

That's right—I turned down the money. For whatever reason, I hadn't felt right accepting Radok's promised pay when Abel had offered it.

"Gourry, Gourry," I admonished, patting him on the back. "If you can't figure that out, I'll tell you when you're older." Although honestly, I had no idea why I'd done it. I don't understand myself sometimes.

"Will he be all right?" Amelia muttered distantly.

I slid my thumbs into my belt. “I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

“Enough about him,” Zelgadiss said flatly, his hard gaze moving to the traveler in the back “What the hell are we gonna do with *you?”*

Xelloss gave Zel one of his serene smiles. “Ah,” he hummed, then chuckled and scratched at his cheek.

Xelloss had made up his mind to come travel with us. *Again.* Zelgadiss still wanted to roast him over the coals a bit.

“Ditching us during our final battle,” Zel sneered, “then reappearing after everything’s said and done. With friends like you, who needs traitors?”

Xelloss waved the comment off with his hand. “Believe it or not,” he said, “I was attacked by the tail end of the Mazoku. Afterward, well…” He laughed. “I lost my way in the forest.”

Zelgadiss scowled. “Figures.”

I looked away. Even though Xelloss had saved me early in the battle, nobody had seen or heard him come to my rescue with his “one-time special” quip. That was just between Xelloss and me.

“Lina?” Gourry asked. “Do you know what happened to that Raltaak guy?”

I shrugged. “No clue,” I replied. “He vanished into the woods early in the fight, and nobody saw him again.”

“Really?” Gourry made a face. “Uh, you think we should hunt him down, maybe?”

Like we haven't already had enough crap to deal with! "Let it go, Gourry. If he wants us, he'll find us, whether we like it or not." I stretched out my arms. "I just want to get back on the road. We've got places to go, people to beat up."

Zelgadiss nodded, Amelia smiled brightly, and Gourry, well, Gourry's eyes starting clouding over. If we didn't get a move on, I was afraid he'd fall asleep standing up.

"Let's go," I declared, pointing to what (I hoped) was the west. "Next stop, Dilse!

Epilogue

The night breeze carried the faint scent of flowers and trees from a nearby meadow. If we'd been in some bustling city that night, the air would've smelled of ale and spices… and urine, maybe, if the city had been filthy enough.

But we weren't in a city. Since leaving Vezendi, we'd stuck to the back roads on our way to the Kingdom of Dilse. The town we'd stopped in was remote and peaceful, with an empty tavern and a guestless inn. The innkeeper had looked shocked when we'd asked to spend the night.

I suppose that's pretty normal in these parts, I thought. Honestly, I was glad for the calm—cities are all well and good, but every girl needs some peace and quiet now and then.

But I still had some sneaking to do. Peaceful and quiet doesn't mean *boring,* y'know.

I wandered around the grounds behind the inn, picking my way by the bright moonlight. For the first time in a while, I hadn't snuck away from the others to do some bandit-hunting; there were other things that had to be taken care of that night.

"Out for a stroll?" asked a familiar voice.

I turned. Xelloss leaned against a wooden fence, his silhouette against the moon. Alongside him was a cart piled with what looked like wooden boxes.

"Not exactly," I replied, sliding my hands into my pockets. "I

was waiting for you."

"Hmm." The dark-robed priest hummed, tilting his head to the side. "And why is that?"

"I wanted to say thanks for saving my life back at the lodge, for one thing."

"You wanted to thank me?" Xelloss asked curiously.

"Once we finished up the whole Radok thing, I started to understand what it was you were doing." I leveled my gaze at him. "You kept Raltaak at bay, didn't you? And you were testing me, if I had to guess."

Xelloss smiled. He stood up from the fence, then melted into the darkness and vanished completely.

"When did you figure it out?" he asked after a moment. I peered into the darkness and saw his form take shape against the moon; he now sat on one of the boxes on the cart.

"You mean that you're a Mazoku?" I clarified. "Pretty much from the start, to tell you the truth."

Xelloss just smiled, and waited.

"It began with Mazenda sealing my magic. I've done enough research on magic to know that no human could possibly do that. Since you beat her, that means *you* can't be human, either."

Xelloss laughed. "My, my. It looks like I never stood a chance against you, did I? You are correct, Miss Lina. I'm a demon, just like Miss Mazenda was."

“But you took her down,” I pointed out. “Which means you must have something pretty complicated going on. I get the feeling you weren’t allied with Raltaak, either.”

“Ah,” Xelloss said with a smile, tapping his index finger against his lips. “As for that, I’m afraid it’s a secret.”

If he *had* been a human, I would’ve beaten the secret out of him. But I knew I didn’t stand a chance against the guy.

Not yet, anyway.

“I had to be sneaky with Raltaak,” Xelloss admitted. “He knew my true form as much as I knew his. So we agreed to not ruin the other’s cover and let matters take their course; my aim, like you said, was simply to keep him at bay.

“But since you were already onto me, it seems there was little reason to keep up appearances.”

“It’s not like the others have caught on yet.”

“Mm. Certainly not Mister Gourry.”

I squinted uncomfortably. “Gourry doesn’t catch on to much of anything,” I murmured. “I do think Amelia and Zel know there’s something up with you, but I doubt they’ve figured out that you’re a Mazoku.”

Xelloss shrugged.

“By the way, Xelloss. What’s your real name?”

Xelloss looked up at the moon, the profile of his face lit in the silver light. “Xelloss the Priest,” he answered simply. “In the service

of Greater Beast Zelas Metalium. Although," he added with a pained smile, "that's quite another matter. My mission has always been to eliminate the Claire Bible manuscript from this world."

I didn't like the sound of that. If Zelgadiss knew that someone in his party was actively trying to destroy the one thing he wanted, things could get very ugly. Xelloss probably recognized the look on my face, because he went on to explain.

"Think of our last little adventure. If that manuscript had gotten into the wrong hands, Miss Lina, then chimeras like Zanaffar could have been mass-produced. Although that wouldn't have actually mattered much to a high- ranking Mazoku like myself, it would have been quite an inconvenience for all the lesser demons.

"Of course, the manuscript I attained was limited, incomplete, and is now no more than ash. And that chimera, as you so aptly proved, could still be handled by humans." He paused, then added, "But if that manuscript piece had been the one described in the royal palace of Dilse…"

Xelloss stopped short of finishing his thought.

"Wait a second," I said quickly. "Are you talking about… humans not being able to control the Lord of Nightmares?!"

Xelloss actually *scowled* at me.

"Don't utter that name in vain again," he snapped. "For a Mazoku of my stature, hearing that name twice is unacceptable."

My blood ran cold. I knew the Lord of Nightmares was supposed to be "the most powerful of all the Demon Lords," but Xelloss' reaction surprised me. Exactly how powerful *was* the Lord of Nightmares?

"But back on topic." Xelloss calmly brushed some hair behind

his ear. “After I burned the manuscript we found with Zanaffar, I reported back to Greater Beast. That’s when I learned of my current assignment.”

“Which is spying on me,” I offered.

“Not exactly. My mission is to protect and guide you.”

I blinked. Say what now?

Xelloss chuckled. “Before your inevitable onslaught of questions, let me just say that that’s all I can reveal. Perhaps you’d be better off saving that breath.”

“Hang on,” I protested. “What about your amplification talismans? Didn’t you sell those to me *before* you took the mission to protect me?”

“Indeed.”

“Then why’d you sell me your prized possessions when you were under no obligation to look out for me?” Xelloss knitted his eyebrow and considered that a moment. “Well, that was a spur-of-the-moment deal,” he said at last, giving me a smile that seemed a little forced. You’re a strange one, Xelloss.

“But to tell you the truth, I’m not very enthusiastic about this project. Hellmaster is the one who gave it to me in the first place.”

“Hellmaster *Phibrizzo?!”* I blurted. Damn, Xelloss had connections!

Xelloss sighed. “Hellmaster is always looking for someone to do his bidding. He lost all his minion priests in the war a thousand

years ago, so that makes other priests fair game. A priest like myself isn't thrilled with that." He held his hand out in an apologetic gesture. "I know it was rude to not tell you, but yes—part of Hellmaster's mission involves protecting you for a bit."

"Right," I said irritably. "And that's why you've been testing me. You wanted to see if the person you're protecting lives up to her reputation; I guess it'd be a great big pain protecting someone who couldn't kick a few asses and take a few names."

I glared at Xelloss, hoping to at least make him feel impolite. But he just nodded cheerfully. I sighed. "Well?" "To put it bluntly," Xelloss said, "I'm not that impressed. Aside from your potential and the skill of your comrades, you barely make the mark."

I grimaced at him. "Aren't you a sweetheart?"

"By the way." Xelloss smiled again, a bit more creepily this time. "What do you intend to do now that you know I'm a Mazoku? Will you… challenge me to a duel, perhaps?"

I shook my head and grunted, "Maybe some other time." I paused for a minute after that, considering my next move. "Tell you what, Xelloss. I'll keep your identity under wraps for now. The others don't have to know."

Xelloss looked surprised. "Really?"

"It may take a little ducking, but it seems like the best option right now. I'm guessing that's what you want, right?"

Xelloss raised his eyebrows. "Indeed," he admitted. "That would be of great assistance, Miss Lina." He paused. "But if that was your

intent all along, why did you want this conversation? Don't you think the matter would have been best left unspoken?"

"No," I replied flatly. "There were still things I wasn't clear on. Besides, I wanted you to confirm what I *thought* I knew. I'd rather know the whole truth if I have to dance around it." I scratched my head. "And frankly, not knowing for sure would've really bugged me."

Xelloss looked up at the moon again. "Well," he said after a moment. "There's some truth to what I've heard about you, Miss Lina—you're certainly no ordinary human."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

Xelloss turned to me, his expression serious. "Yes," he replied. "It's among the highest praise that a Mazoku such as myself could possibly give a human."

So I was supposed to feel privileged. *Great, Xelloss,* I thought. *Try selling that on a greeting card.*

"So where do we go from here?"

"Forward." Xelloss pointed his staff at the moon, which hung in the western sky.

"To the moon?" I asked sarcastically.

Xelloss smiled in the darkness. "To the north of the Kingdom of Dilse," he said calmly. "To where the original Claire Bible lies."